最強をこごらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点
4
KAZUMA KAMACHI
鎌池和馬
illust.
真早
その名は「ぶーぶー」
電撃文庫

The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo - Volume 04

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Girl's Grill

最強をこじらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点
4
その名は「ぶーぶー」
そなたは私の恩人だ。
冗談抜きに、私の人生を救ってくれた。
だからどんな悩みでも必ず応えてあげるよ。
KAZUMA KAMACHI
鎌池和馬
illust.
真早

【賢者】
「シビュラちゃーん、
奥のテーブル空いてる？」
「それでしたらカウンターは
いかがでしょう」

【氷瀑姫】
ヴィルデフラウ
「ええ、わたくしの
闇討ちコレクションですわ。
ヤミコレ☆」
【ロイヤルエルフ】
「【追閃レーザーロック】」
「チェック」

【剣聖女】
ベアトリーチェ
「ただただ薙ぎ倒されるが良い、
【賢者】！
当たり前の
人として!!」

【???】
「……」

妖精達の女王
【ストリオーナ】
「くそ、どいつもこいつも
変態ばっかりなのが珠に瑕なんだ、
【ブレイクニュース】は」

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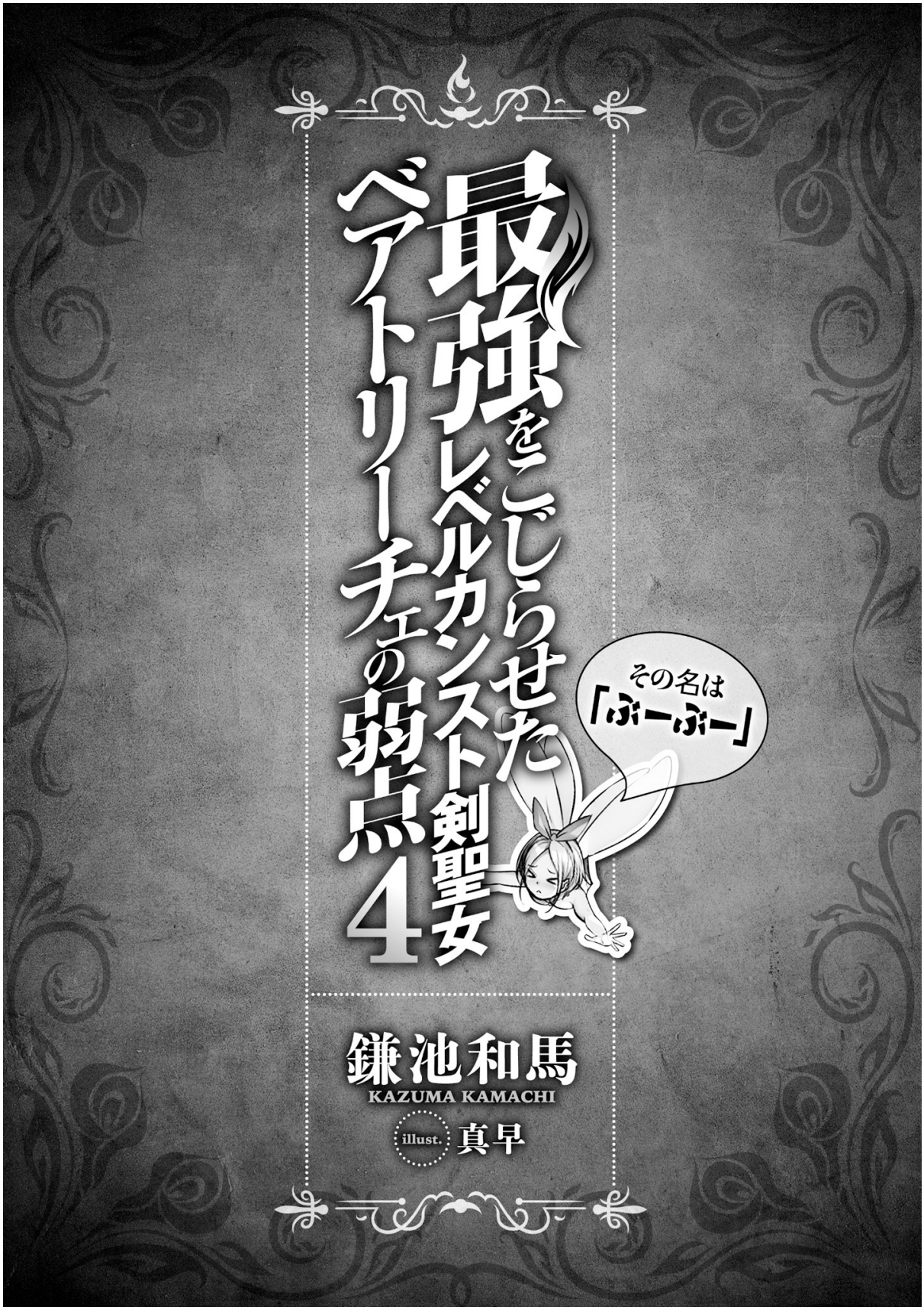
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その名は
「ぶーぶー」
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
illust. 真早

Here is the Training Menu! Subquest Reception Counter

“Oh, Boo Boo. What are you up to today?”

Someone spoke from a higher level of rock.

Ground’s Nir was a small but nature-filled island that a human could walk around in about 3 days. A lovely voice rang out like a bell. It was Fairy Queen Sutriona. She looked like a 10-year-old girl with long silver hair, white skin, and reddish-purple eyes. She wore a ribbon dress that was no more than black ribbons wrapped around her body with large flower petals and a miniskirt added to make it look more dress-like. Lastly, she mysteriously spoke from a position of superiority. Everything about her was imbalanced, but she was one of the Break News, the paradoxes with souls that took their name from the fact that they were sources of chaos so great that merely sighting one was treated as breaking news. They were bringers of extreme environmental change who readily referred to the Thousand Dragon, a giant dragon measuring more than 1000 meters, as their weakest.

The arrival of a typhoon was a problem, but if they never arrived, the national water jug would never fill. A volcanic eruption was a disaster, but ancient volcanic ash had helped create the fertile land. The Break News played that role as a single life form.

“Boo?”

When you got down to it, she was still a lovely girl (←important) and her words elicited a tilt of the head from the Iberian Orc named Boo Boo, whose porcine-faced but humanoid body measured nearly 4

meters tall using human units.

In the mountains of Ground's Nir, he held something like a large wriggling serpent and he turned toward the small queen who looked down at him from above (and who supposedly wore no underwear).

"I just caught a Large White Meat Lizard's tail. They taste great on their own and they grow back no matter how many times you cut them off of the lizard, but if you take them to the ocean, you can fish for Red Meat King Scallops."

On the higher rock, Sutriona thought about that. A Red Meat King Scallop was a bivalve larger than a bed that lured in targets with illusions of giant jewels or unbelievably beautiful girls. Once its prey was close, it snapped shut and would not let go.

They were nightmarishly violent and much like a treasure chest trap. She wondered if they were one of the reasons the humans from another world did not like approaching the ocean. And as Boo Boo had said, the contents were red and delicious. They had a strange flavor like the perfect mixture of fatty meat and fish.

But Sutriona was more interested in something else.

"No, Boo Boo, I was asking about the basket on your back. I imagine my underling who has essentially moved in with you weaved it in a single night like so many of your other possessions."

"It's light and sturdy, so it's really useful."

"…And why do you have 4 or 5 human-sized stones in that light and sturdy basket?"

He of course did not need stones that large to capture the Large White Meat Lizard he was using as bait to fish for something better. In fact, it was dangerous enough simply running around the

harshly-sloped mountains following the trail of wild animals in this realm of eat or be eaten. The area looked plain enough, but it would even wear down the lives of the level cap humans who were thoroughly reinforced by various kinds of Magic.

“I’m training.”

“Hm?”

That was a childish thing to say, but anyone who knew the lifestyle of Boo Boo, the final Iberian Orc, would be surprised. His strength primarily came from the workout necessitated by his lifestyle. What did he need to do to acquire food and protect his home? He would cross rivers, climb mountains, pursue beasts, chop down trees, and construct a house. And all that had built up his muscles.

But now he claimed to be abandoning the wild Iberian Orc life to work his muscles simply to train them.

Now, how much room did he have for growth when he could already beat down the Thousand Dragon with only a blunt weapon?

“…I couldn’t protect Disaster or Beatrice.”

Despite the great possibility he already held, his voice sounded somehow unreliable as he leaned over and retied the basket’s shoulder straps.

“It was only coincidence that Beatrice survived when the Sage appeared. If things had been just a little different, I never would have seen her again. Squeal, so I need to be stronger. Catching my own food like this means I’m a grownup, but that isn’t enough. I need to be a bigger Boo Boo who can protect more than my own life.”

Sutriona silently narrowed her eyes.

Into a smile.

He did not seem aware of it himself, but that pig-faced giant had already saved many lives, including the palm-sized Fairies. His lack of awareness may have been the best part of his salvation, but nothing could be better than him finding something he truly cared about. And as long as he felt that way, his growth would know no bounds. Nor would he be swallowed up by his own power and transformed.

“I see.”

As she summed up her conclusion like that, the (pantie-less) Fairy Queen brushed back her long hair and placed her hands on her hips. (The Fairies had specially woven her ribbon dress out of Ground Spider silk, so no matter how wildly she moved about, the fabric would move on its own and cover her up!) This was so very enjoyable, but she made a mental note of her tendency to look down on people whenever she opened her mouth.

“Then, Boo Boo, did you know there is a way to train your body that is more effective than placing a needless burden on it? And it is standing right in front of you.”

“Boo?”

“Now, now. Have you forgotten what I said when we first met? I believe I said you are decently muscular, but I could teach you how to use your body if you made me your master.”

“Really, Sutriona…? You’ll help me out!? You’ll give me the power I need to save Beatrice and the others!?”

Seeing him lean forward with hope filling his face and sparkling light filling his eyes, Sutriona realized anew how blessed she was. She was haughty, domineering, and vain. Whenever she met someone, she could not help but talk like this and she readily made selfish complaints, so she was grateful to have someone who would accept her.

So the Fairy Queen kept her hands arrogantly on her hips and smiled while actually relying on and indulging in someone else.

“Of course. If you insist, I suppose I could teach you a thing or two.”

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice, the red-armored and miniskirted representative of the level cap humans who Signed In to Ground’s Nir from Earth, held her head in her hands.

She had lost to the Sage.

More than just pull strings from the shadows, that VIP was thought to have worked with the delinquent soldiers of Elkiad to purge the Iberian Orc village in the past. On top of that, when her black gothic lolita dress and silver restraints were burned away, she had been revealed to look just like Beatrice herself. It was possible that the Gates that surpassed distance to connect Earth to Ground’s Nir could also interfere with time and it was thus possible that a future version of Beatrice herself had traveled back in time to cause all of this mess.

Nevertheless, Beatrice’s mind was filled with shame and embarrassment more than fear, confusion, or guilt.

(Ah, ahhh… How am I supposed to look Boo Boo in the eye now? I kept going on and on about trust, but I’ve never actually let him see my weaknesses…)

When Beatrice had once gone berserk in an attempt to take the Elkiad leader’s life, Boo Boo had directly confronted her and she had lost badly. But this was different. It was a truly pathetic and utter defeat with no room for excuses. Her mask of maturity had been thoroughly torn from her. She had shared so much time with Boo Boo, but she no longer knew how close they were. Any

thought on the matter made her entire face grow bright red and she had to cover her face with her gauntleted hands.

(Come to think of it, Boo Boo really is amazing for letting me see both his strengths and his weaknesses. How can you bare your heart to someone like that?)

Whatever the case, she was back to square one.

Pursuing the Sage had seemed like grasping at clouds, but now she had physically appeared before them. She still intended to do harm to her surroundings and she plotted in secret between the 2 worlds. On top of that, Beatrice now had to suspect the Sage was herself from the future. Fighter Priest Armelina, another from the level cap group, had suggested it was someone else who had adjusted their appearance to look just like Beatrice.

But in that case, that other person would need a reason to borrow Beatrice's appearance. Beatrice had to investigate whoever was plotting in the shadows and, if it was something that would cause suffering to a great many people, stop it at all costs.

And if the Sage really was Beatrice and she had traveled back in time to crush the Iberian Orc village, Beatrice would have to make up for that crime. She could alter the present which was connected to the past and the future, so she had to influence the future to avoid that past incident.

She was groping in the dark here, but she could not come to a stop.

She doubted this was something she could do alone.

She did not know if she could accomplish it even with her full strength.

But that was all the more reason she could not afford to make this

awkward. If she was to take even a single step off the rails laid out by whoever this was, she had to build up a new relationship with Boo Boo.

(Oh.)

With that in mind, she left the inn town, walked through the mountains, and heard a rustling. It was not a wild animal. She was oddly certain of that right away.

(Is that Boo Boo?)

For some reason, the Holy Swordswoman hid behind a large nearby tree. She may not have been as prepared as she thought, so she felt some light self-loathing.

Meanwhile, she heard a voice from beyond the bushes.

“Boo. Sutriona, I want to get even better. I want to be a bigger Boo Boo who I don’t have to be ashamed of.”

(Sutri-…what?)

Beatrice was unsure what was going on. The maiden in love thought of the Break News who looked like a 10-year-old girl in a swimsuit. (Not that Beatrice’s outfit was much better.)

And then she heard his next words.

“So, Sutriona, help me out! Use your body to make me a grownup!!”

Her mind went blank.

She was mostly confined to the Detached Magical Palace, isolating her from a normal school society, but even she knew where babies came from. Or she thought she did. She at least knew that time of the month was more than just god harassing her.

So…

“Wait, wait, wait just a seeeeeeec!! Boo Boo, what are you trying to do while I’m still recovering from the pummeling the Sage gave me? And don’t you dare say something clever about ‘when the cat’s away’!!!”

Oddly enough, Boo Boo’s wish was granted.

By making Sutriona his teacher, he was blessed with a training method more effective than pursuing wild animals while carrying large stones.

Mission: Do something – anything! – about blazing scarlet Holy Swordswoman Beatrice!!

Chapter 1: Boss_Quest 01 "Kill_House" Grade: ☆☆☆☆

Part 1

“……
……”

The warm sunlight of late morning filled one corner of the human base known as the inn town.

Beatrice sat motionless with her hands over her face. She did not know what to say to the others in her level cap group: White Witch Filinion who hid her body below a cape, a far-too-short dress, and shorts and Fighter Priest Armelina who wore a priest outfit with a bold slit up to above her hips.

The other two hesitantly spoke to the girl who had gone red to the ears and had steam rising from her head.

“U-ummm. Beatrice, we came all the way to Ground’s Nir. I know you experienced a pretty bad failure, but we can only stay here for a few days at a time, so can’t we make effective use of that time by getting to the Labyrinth?”

“If you can explain that failure to yourself, then it’ll be okay. No matter what you think on the surface, you’ve finished processing it deep down and have it stored away inside you. Don’t drag this along with you, Beatrice. We need to think about the future instead.”

She understood their point.

They could not see it now, but the Sage's hidden plotting had to be continuing. And she would be doing more than enjoying this age on a whim. Whether or not she was Beatrice from the future, Beatrice needed the power to stop her if it came to that. That was not something that would just fall into her lap. Step 1 was the Labyrinth. Step 2 was the Labyrinth. Even if she had to sit out Steps 3 and 4, Step 5 was the Labyrinth. She had learned just how inexperienced she was in that previous battle, so she had to work toward earning a ton of Experience Points and learning new Magic.

"…I know that. I really, really do know that. But…"

"Isn't sitting around only giving you more chance to remember that shameful memory of your own making? I feel like it will do less damage in the long run if you force yourself to keep moving at times like this."

"I feel like that would turn her into something like a workaholic father who neglects his family. And if she relies on her combat skills to drive out her embarrassing memories, she'll probably turn into a complete berserker."

Beatrice sniffled, but it was true they only had so much time. And she did not know when she would run across the Sage again. When that time came, she did not want her own or someone else's life to be lost due to a small moment of sloth.

"…So where should we begin? The trendy hunting ground at the moment is Ice Burn 72. To be blunt, that's a bad Elemental match for me and my fire."

"Oh, in that case." The glasses girl clapped her hands in front of her large chest. "The rumors tend to fly right past you, Beatrice, but the inn town has recently gained a bar that gives you powerful and long-lasting Buffs. If you have trouble with ice, why not get some

temporary Water Resistance?”

“I’m not going to forget how you slipped in an insult there, cow. But Buffs, huh?”

To use a more complicated term, Buffs were strengthening support Magic. They were used to increase one’s basic Stats such as HP, STR, and VIT and, as Filinion had pointed out, to fill in an Elemental Defense one had trouble with. The clothing Beatrice and the others wore while in Ground’s Nir was Status-reinforcing Magic taking the form of clothing, so receiving a small accessory would provide some kind of support. However…

“Wouldn’t you be afraid of a Buff from a complete stranger? It’s like reusing surgery tools or taking home a USB card you found in an internet café that anyone can use.”

“You never leave your birdcage, so what do you know about cafés, Beatrice?”

“Heh heh hehhh. As your White Witch recovery specialist, I’ll take that as a sign that the shy young lady trusts me with her body☆”

The teenage girl cowered down at that observation, pouted her lips, and tapped her index fingers together in front of her chest.

“Besides, even if this is another world where Japanese law doesn’t apply, I still don’t feel like drinking at my age. I don’t want to claim it’s a medical act as an excuse.”

“Oh, you don’t get the Buffs like that. I hear a ring made from Magic is dropped into the drink and you pull the ring out and put it on for the Buff.”

“So it’s like a fashionable and effective fortune cookie? Well, if that’s all it is.”

Since the Buff was reliant on someone else, they would not know

how long it would last, the third party could intentionally cut off its effects at an inopportune time, and there was even a risk of it interfering with their Shining Weapon's management terminal when using Magic. They could not be optimistic, but Beatrice was at least willing to check out the popular bar. And if things looked sketchy, she could simply take a peek inside and refuse any Buffs.

"So have you heard what percentage you get?"

"I've only heard incomplete rumors, but it's apparently up to 10%."

"That's pretty incredible…"

An Elemental Defense of 100% would completely negate that Element, so 10% might not seem like much. However, it meant a lot to gain an instant boost without using any of your own Experience Points. The gears used as currency contained Experience Points, but it was faster to receive an Elemental Defense directly from an expert than to train yourself up from the beginning of the Magic tree diagram.

"Okay, Filinion, show us the way to this bar."

"Yes, sir. To be honest, I've never been there so it takes guts to go there alone."

"By the way, there are a lot of different kinds of bars. What does this one specialize in?"

"Heh heh heh heh heh. Meat!! They're practically brimming with meat dishes!!"

"…I thought you said this was a bar. Why is this glasses cow so focused on the meat?"

That was probably how she (or rather, one part of her: the chest) had grown so big, but the two who had smaller meals (and breastplates) did not want to accept it.

“There used to be a lackluster pizza place there, but once word got out they were shutting down, it seems someone came and bought the place.”

“It can be hard to tell with how similar all the buildings look, but this is a pretty expensive district. If they had waited until the place was vacant, the bidding wars probably would have increased the cost considerably. Whoever it was must have good information sources. I smell a shrewd businessman.”

Every human involved in Ground’s Nir gathered in the inn town, so it was always crowded. The 3 of them passed by a great variety of people on the way to the bar.

“A lot more people are insisting on pajamas lately, aren’t they? It used to be that you didn’t want to take anything more into the Labyrinth than absolutely necessary, so everyone learned some barrier Magic to use like a sleeping bag.”

“That’s because sleep is directly related to the recovery of Willpower which is at the base of our Magic. If the goal is to efficiently recover as much of it as possible in as short a time as possible, it makes sense that people insist on tools for more comfortable sleep. And trendy Ice Burn 72 is especially cold, so you’ll really want some warm pajamas or a thick blanket, right?”

“I’m sure it’s just a temporary fad. And we really are simple if sleeping is enough for us to recover.”

The 3 of them continued walking while glancing over at the roadside stands selling fabric made from Ground Spider silk or Large Deceptive Silkworm cocoons as well as completed costume pajamas or negligees.

“Oh, I think it’s right around that corner there. It’s called Girl’s Grill and its excellent reputation for cute-looking dishes just keeps rising. The only downside is that it’s so popular so soon after opening that

it isn't easy to get a seat."

"Filinion, you're always full of information that has nothing to do with exploring the Labyrinth. Where do you get it all from?"

"Heh. Fashion is all about ignoring the practical and seeing how many pointless and inefficient things you can add in."

A real college girl was mocking a real teenage girl, so Beatrice had no choice but to put her in a headlock.

"Ow, ow, ow! Beatr- my glasses, the sides of my glasses are digging into my temples!!"

"Then curse the karma that led you to be born with glasses, cow."

"I wasn't born with them! And it's starting to become standard by this point, but the damage is building up as you call me a cow all the time!! Do you have any idea what'll happen if this anger explodes!?"

"What a pain."

"…They're going to get even bigger?"

"Wait a second!! These aren't bags of stress, you know!?"

At any rate, the Holy Swordswoman held onto the White Witch's head as they rounded the corner.

"Welcome to Girl's Grill! Will it be 4 of you?"

The voice of the waitress standing at the entrance reached them outside. It was a lively, lovely, and gentle voice that carried well but was not at all piercing. Beatrice was honestly impressed because that was not a technique she could emulate. However…

The Sage wore a cute, frilly waitress uniform with a beaming smile

on her face.

It was so sudden.

She wore twintails that did not suit her alluring body in the slightest. The Holy Swordswoman was not at all mentally prepared for this sudden arrival of danger in an assumed safe zone, so her legs tangled up and she tripped quite spectacularly onto the stone-paved road.

The Sage had a heart-shaped cloth over her chest. The miniskirt and stockings accentuated the thighs visible between.

While lying face down, Beatrice raised her head and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Wha-…you-…wait just a minuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuute!!!!!!”

“Oh, dear. Are you okay, miss? Here, use this wet towel to wipe the dirt off of your face and body. And, um, will it be 3 of you?”

“What are you doing…? Why are you opening a bar here while walking around looking exactly like me!? We were in a real fight to the death over the truth of the Iberian Orc village, weren’t we!? Weren’t you the kind of person who arrogantly sits on her throne within the demon king’s castle in the deepest depths of the demon world full of rock and toxic swamps!?”

“Oh ho ho. Now, now, miss. Saying we look exactly alike is an exaggeration. There are differences. For example, chest size. Also? Chest size. And the one that’s like night and day? Chest size.”

“Do you want me to kill you right here and now!!!???”

“I was merely stating the truth. Now, miss, let me show you to your

table.”

The way she responded with a perfect smile made Beatrice look like the villain.

The people around them did not know the truth and their eyes on her were painful.

“…Doesn’t anyone find it odd that there are two people here who look exactly alike?”

“Eh? But one look at our chests and-…”

Beatrice silenced the puzzled response by grinding her teeth. Was the Sage saying that alone made that much of a difference?

She just about called up her fire illusion Magic to draw out the frames and lines out of habit, but it was no use. She had no idea where to start with the connecting lines.

Beatrice looked up from the ground and glared at Filinion, but the glasses cow vigorously shook her head. She had apparently only heard rumors of the popular bar and had not known who exactly worked there.

“B-besides, I know there is a wide variety when it comes to waitress uniforms. And this maybe tricking you into thinking it’s a dress thanks to the headdress, corset, and decorative sleeves, but that’s no more than see-through red negligee, isn’t it!? You can just about see the black underwear below it! In fact, it’s bad enough that I can even tell it’s black!! And that’s my appearance you’re using!”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but business is booming thanks to this.”

“Are you a living case of defamation!?”

“Pajamas are the in thing right now, so I thought it might be good to ride that wave.”

Beatrice did not quite understand that metaphor, but the customer floor was about the size of 2 school classrooms when counting both the counter and tables. There would also be a kitchen and food storeroom in the back. The cow had claimed the place was known for its meat dishes, but the interior design was somehow reminiscent of a ship. There was a ship’s wheel, a wooden life buoy, and other things on the wall. The lamps in the center of the round tables were reused ship lanterns.

“Did they reuse all of these materials? I feel like we saw some similar items on the Next Voyager grounded on the southern beach.”

“Stripping materials and furnishings from a ghost ship that houses a Vampire sounds like a good way of getting yourself into trouble…”

The Sage maintained her service industry smile and ignored Filinion and Armelina’s comments.

“Here is your table. I will be your server for today. Please look over these menus while you wait.”

They heard a hand bell ringing.

“Hurry! Bring out my extra order of meat!”

“How many shots of increased Water Resistance can you get again?”

“I think I’ll get a drink for STR, for INT, and…oh, for AGI and LUK too! I’ll take all the super attack Buffs!!”

“Yes, yes, just a moment!” cheerfully said the Sage as she moved over to that table. This was not just a one-shot gag to harass Beatrice. She really was working here.

“I-is she really working dressed like that…? Looking just like me is bad enough, but why does she have to be wearing a see-through negligee!?”

“Hmm, maybe it’s because of that old cliché with waitresses in a fantasy world. I mean, she does have a far larger chest than you, Beatrice.”

“?”

“Buff-B-…”

That was too much for Beatrice even as a joke, so she poked Filinion in the eyes with a gauntleted scissors. With the sound of thin glass breaking, the cow was left writhing on the floor with her hands over her face. This was not the glasses girl’s lucky day. Although the White Witch did bring it all onto herself. Beatrice ignored her and continued observing the bar.

The wooden building was not very large, but the dishes were only being carried out by 2 waitresses: the Sage who was in charge of the tables and another one at the counter. Beatrice’s group had filled the last of the empty seats, so it had to be difficult for just the 2 of them to run the entire bar. Even with a handwritten memo pad on their waist, it was impressive they did not get orders wrong all the time.

“Anyway, Ice Burn 72 is way too cold, so I need to warm up my body.”

“Yeah, that cold gets to you no matter what you wear, so it’s way worse than the Gimmicks or Traps. You can’t get a wink of sleep without any preparation, so you can’t recover your Willpower either.”

“It would be great if I could get 100% Water Resistance, but, well, as you get closer to 100%, the amount of necessary Experience

Points rises like crazy in a quadratic curve, so that would be inefficient.”

Unlike the Sage, the other waitress was a girl with bodylines too thin to even call slender. She had her long blonde hair in twintails just like the Sage, she had blue eyes, and she had oddly pointed ears. The inn town generally refused anyone who was not human, but she might have been some kind of Elf.

“Sibyl-chaaan, mixing conflicting Elemental defenses won’t make them negate each other, will they? I want both water and fire, but is there some kind of fine print there?”

“Yes, yes, yes. You will gain both effects, but even if you double up with the same Element, the time remains unchanged: 24 hours only. Make sure to write the starting time on the back of your hand so the end of effects doesn’t catch you by surprise down in the Labyrinth.”

…Had someone used Magic to make herself look like an Elf, or did it not matter if someone was a Nonhuman if they were skilled and beautiful? Beatrice felt it was not fair that Boo Boo was so strictly rejected yet Sibyl was readily accepted as she carried out colorful drinks with a ring at the bottom of each glass.

“Hehh. I was expecting some crude local beer, but they have a decent variety. They also have gin, vodka, oh, and even whisky. The selection of cocktails looks good too. To brew it all in such a short time, I imagine they used one of the large Alchemy pots the distillers use, but I wonder what Ground’s Nir ingredients they used.”

Armelina seemed to be enjoying herself as she viewed the menu. She glanced over at some other customers who were stacking Gears up on the edge of their table to pay their bill.

“And they do a good job of getting customers in and out. The Buffs

only last a limited time, so to make the most use of their effects, the people will want to get to the Labyrinth right away instead of sitting and chatting. That explains why they're doing such good business. You won't find many bars back in reality that get new customers in every 10 or 20 minutes."

"Th-this is no time to be praising them. The Sage might be smiling out in public, but who's doing the cooking in the back? I just hope half-rotten Disaster isn't wearing a chef's hat and waving a frying pan around."

That was an amusing image, but it would be no laughing matter if it actually happened.

After all, the Sage had spent decades hiding in the shadows of history, but now she was boldly showing herself. She would not have done so on a whim. She had to have some kind of goal. And this change had been triggered by Beatrice's group storming into the Sage's hideout.

There was more to this.

This felt like the harbinger of a great disturbance.

The Sage had used the corpses of many Iberian Orcs to create Disaster as her pawn, so what kind of damage would she bring to the humans' inn town?

"Hey, Filinion, Armelina. Do you think anyone would believe us if we said that was the Sage they've sought for so long?"

"Not a chance. They'd only doubt our sanity. She's probably taking advantage of the fact that she's stayed in hiding for so long."

"When an art museum is transporting a famous painting, they apparently use a normal bike courier instead of putting together a largescale escort convoy. But this still requires a fair amount of guts

in addition to meticulous calculations. She really understands how the world works and how to manipulate it."

Eventually, the Sage returned to their table even though they had not rung the hand bell. Her skirt was so short it was right on the borderline of seeing her underwear and the way it swayed as she walked made it all the more risqué. She held a round tray to her belly and used it to lift up her large breasts while maintaining her perfect smile.

And this was the person with enough strength to wipe out the powerful Iberian Orcs in a single day.

"Are you ready to order?"

"Yes. We want to make an attack on Ice Burn 72, so I'll take whatever Buffs you recommend in a nonalcoholic drink. I'll also have some food that won't interfere with the drink. I'm willing to spend about 5 Small Ruby Gears."

Beatrice's smooth request transformed the Sage's smile into a wicked grin. That vague order might sound like a test of the waitress's skill, but it contained a fatal flaw.

Without knowing the Holy Swordswoman's Stats, the Sage could not provide the optimal Buffs to reinforce her strengths and make up for her weaknesses.

"Understood. Our clothing and decorations are Magic, so you can find yourself unable to equip an accessory if it requires more Willpower than you have. But the greater your Willpower capacity, the less likely that is to happen. I am sure you will be pleased with the results."

Nevertheless, the Sage in the red negligee modified into a waitress uniform did not pause even for a second.

As if to announce she understood Beatrice more intimately than anyone else.

“Now, what would you 2 like?”

Part 2

The Detached Magic Palace was a kilometer-wide green paradise cut out of Roppongi, Tokyo. Misoka, the middle sister of the 3 maids there, was dumbfounded.

“Obwabahoo…”

The girl in charge of the mansion had no idea.

Haruka, the adorable third sister and a nervous small animal of maid with glossy black hair worn short, would wildly strip off her apron dress the second her master was not looking. She would then don nothing more than a baggy track suit top over her naked body, lie on her bed with her legs innocently bared, and munch on potato chips (an economical family-sized bag of consommé flavor).

“Wh-wh-what do you think you’re doing!? It’s almost dinnertime!”

“You know, I don’t serve this black-hearted mansion built with a pool of tax money. I serve milady! I can’t work up any motivation without her around!! Sighhh… Whyyyy does she have to spend the night in Ground’s Nir again?”

“The lady is busy gathering the Pieces needed to revolutionize the world for the better, so it can’t be helped! She even injured herself in order to distort the completion of that room temperature superconductor that could have been used to create satellite-mounted large-caliber railguns…”

“I wasn’t asking for that kind of teacher’s pet answer! Now get lost!!”

“H-hey. You’re in charge of cooking today, so if you can’t get motivated, what are we supposed to do about dinner!?”

“I don’t care. You can just pick up a bento at the convenience store or get takeout at a gyudon place. You’re civilized people, aren’t you? Ugh, everything’s so boring when milady isn’t around.”

She lay face down on the bed, grabbed some chips, and drank cola directly from a bottle with no “diet” qualifier. She did not seem to care that her small butt was just about sticking out from below the track suit top or that the modest curves of her chest were almost visible through the neck.

She’s hopeless, thought Misoka in all seriousness.

If she was allowed to grow up like this, she could easily become a cook who got drunk in the kitchen. And if her course in life was to be corrected, now was the time. They had to strike while the iron was hot!!

“By the way, Haruka.”

“Whah ih iht, Onee-chan?”

“…I recorded this entire conversation on a digital recorder, but what kind of future do you think you will have if I let our sister hear it? A bright one???”

“Wait!?”

Haruka frantically got up as Misoka waved around the stick-shaped electronic device.

“It sure would be embarrassing to receive a serious spanking at your age. And we both know our sister really will do it. There’ll be a

shine in her glasses and she'll expressionlessly pull up your skirt, pull down your drawers, and count to 100."

"I-I thought we had a private gentleman's agreement behind the scenes! Surely you aren't going to say that didn't count because we didn't actually sign a document! Right!? Right!?"

"If you understand, then go prepare dinner. You're a maid, aren't you?"

Misoka sounded exasperated, but she had not actually hit the digital recorder's record button. She took their gentleman's agreement seriously. She only wanted her little sister to get to work and to shake free of her laziness that was limited to when their master was not watching.

And after Misoka hardened her heart to act like a big sister, the oldest sister, Iroka, called in from outside the room.

"Misokaaa, you don't seem to be working on the hallway flower arrangement like I asked. Should I assume you are shirking your duties? Oh, dear. Am I going to have to count out the spankings on my little sister's butt at this age?"

"Wait, wait, wait, waaaiiiit!!!???"

Part 3

It was an ominous sign.

But with no objective proof that this was the Sage and no idea how to actually fight her, grabbing her Shining Weapon rapier and randomly swinging it around would only make Beatrice the villain.

Establishing a popular bar and gathering favorable attention from across the inn town seemed to be one step in a larger plan. That bar was quickly becoming an indispensable pillar of the inn town. At this rate, attacking the waitress Sage could mean making an enemy of every human in the inn town.

But someone was entirely unaware of Beatrice's worries.

"Boo, boo, boo."

In the mountains dyed by the colors of sunset, Boo Boo the Iberian Orc was once more humming through his prized nose and spending the day in search of food. He wanted the power to protect Beatrice and the others he cared about from the threat of the Sage. Sutriona had put together a special training menu for him, but he could not abandon his daily life either. He was entirely self-sufficient, so he could not just use a convenience store or online supermarket. Neglecting that necessary cycle would only lead to death.

"Yeah, I managed to dig up this Steak Potato really well!!"

Boo Boo crouched down at the base of a thick tree and dug up the dark soil with both hands. He held something that looked like a thick tube. That king of vegetarian cooking tasted like fatty meat when sliced and cooked, but despite its great size, it was difficult to find and incredibly hard to pull up without breaking. That made this an important catch. Sutriona would be happy since she was eating with him more often due to the special training menu.

(Boo. When I find something tasty, she always smiles!)

And then…

"That is a good one, but it's been in the ground for a little too long. Steak Potatoes that have started to sprout can be a little bitter, so you should lightly boil it before cooking to get the bitterness out."

“…”

A gentle voice spoke to him without warning, so Boo Boo snapped his head in that direction. So many wild animals lurked in the mountain, but he had not at all noticed this person approach. Their presence was as fleeting as a ghost’s, so they were more frightening than a ferocious beast that cracked branches underfoot and knocked over trees in a rude approach.

The ghost wore red armor and a white miniskirt and her silver and red hair was long and straight. She leaned against a nearby tree and pointed at her feet.

Still smiling, she spoke like they were old friends.

“Why not grab some Cheerful Alraune while you’re at it? Throw that in the pot and it will suppress any unwanted odors while you boil out the bitterness. You’ve always been fine with bitter and spicy foods, but you were terrible with herbs and medicinal smells. Well, that might have more to do with your nose than your tongue.”

“The…Sage…?”

“Oh, c’mon, Boo Boo.”

She spoke in a gentle voice with the corners rounded off.

But before she finished speaking, she had already left the tree and entered within Boo Boo’s deadly range.

“Call me Beatrice. Just like old times.”

He did not have time to speak, much less fall back.

The red-armored Sage slowly raised a single index finger. She did not draw her Shining Weapon rapier and she did not clench her delicate hand into a fist. She only lightly touched the center of Boo Boo’s belly with her fingertip.

It was a kind action, like mischievously tickling a lover's body.

Nevertheless, a great roar exploded through the mountains like a giant drumbeat. That mass of powerful muscles had outmatched even a 1000-meter dragon, but now he doubled over. A dreadful impact passed through his stomach and out his back, so he remained in place while the trees behind him were felled by an invisible wave passing in a straight line.

"Oh…"

He was not given a chance to resist or fight back.

He had been holding the Steak Potato like a stuffed animal or body pillow, but he dropped it, could not support himself with his legs, and collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

"…Boo."

As she watched the Iberian Orc slowly collapse, the Sage brushed her long hair back with a hand and gave a satisfied nod.

"You lasted 3 whole seconds? You have been training, Boo Boo. You were really manly☆"

With that, she kept her eyes facing forward but sent her left hand out to the side.

Her fingertips cut through the empty space like a bullet and lightly grabbed the torso of a palm-sized Fairy in a pink dress.

"Ah!?"

It was Boo Boo's unauthorized roommate, Meridiana, and she was still confused even after being captured. And this was unusual. Fairies tended to be extremely shy because they were at the bottom of the food chain, so this short-haired Fairy would not normally fly within arm's reach of someone else. It was like

scooping up a small fish in your palm or snatching a small bird from a tree branch: they would just flit or flutter out of the way. The Fairies should have been another of those neighbors who were close but out of reach. And yet…

With the pink Fairy between her fingertips, a wicked look entered whoever-it-was's smile.

If she squeezed just a little, she could probably crush the Fairy with ease, but she did not.

“I’m sure word will get out before long either way, but I’ll leave a message with you regardless: I am about to bring Boo Boo to Girl’s Grill in the inn town. You Fairies specialize in Craft techniques and can’t directly fight, so you can’t do anything about it yourself. Feel free to tell whoever you like.”

“…”

Why? How?

Meridiana’s eyes were filled with intense confusion and fear.

Boo Boo was her kind savior, but most of the humans despised the Iberian Orcs. Taking him to the human inn town was sure to cause chaos on a large scale. And that was bound to leave deep scars on his heart.

But the Sage used her empty hand’s thumb to point in a different direction. A short distance from the underbrush was a narrow road the humans had carelessly paved with stone. A cart sat there with a bundle of thick rope on top.

“Girl’s Grill is introducing a new dish,” she said. “Don’t you think everyone would gather around if we’re holding an experiment to see how many Experience Points you get from the meat of a 4-meter pig-faced giant?”

Part 4

It was fully dusk by the time word reached Beatrice’s group.

They were lucky they had remained above ground to investigate the Sage instead of heading down into the Labyrinth as soon as they left Girl's Grill.

"Goddamn her!! There really isn't a single good thing about her!!"

"Calm down, Beatrice! Acting at random isn't going to save Boo Boo!"

They had gathered at the brick house the Fairies had made for Boo Boo. Palm-sized Meridiana sniffled and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands over and over.

"Sniff, sob…"

But repeating the same action would accomplish nothing. Unless they could get Boo Boo back safely, those tears would keep flowing.

"I…I couldn't do anything while Boo Boo was taken away. I watched as she placed him on the cart, tied him to it, and then started toward the inn town, but, but…wahhhhh!!"

"It isn't your fault. In fact, you did a good job of restraining yourself. If you had forced yourself to stand up to her and gotten yourself killed, we wouldn't have gotten this information."

Armelina the police officer tried her best, but she failed to remove the heavy bonds squeezing at Meridiana's heart. When faced with her savior's crisis, she had done nothing, turned back, and become the very messenger their enemy had wanted her to be. Only she could know how much that scalded her soul. Every Nonhuman species had their own Skill, but those were not necessarily useful in combat.

Fairy Elder Morgan fluttered down in her orange dress and placed her hands on her sobbing brethren's shoulders.

“Shed no more tears, Meridiana. You are in front of guests.”

“Sob, but…but…”

Seeing that tiny neighbor made Beatrice realize that she could never wipe away those tears without winning and bringing Boo Boo back.

Filinion, who was knowledgeable about the inn town’s rumors and trends, pushed up her glasses and spoke.

“People are already talking about a new dish at Girl’s Grill. It seems there was a small commotion when the cart carrying Boo Boo was taken to the back of the bar. The Sage apparently smiled and told everyone to look forward to it.”

“…I’m betting it’s essentially an alternative form for a public execution.” Sutriona sounded irritated as she stroked Meridiana’s head with a finger. “It makes me sick. I doubt your words can get through to the mastermind or the audience. That’s the kind of foolish human I’m more than willing to wipe out with my Sandstorm of Red Madness.”

“Phewww…”

Seeing someone else heat up must have actually helped her calm down because Beatrice breathed a long sigh. Then she spoke to change her focus.

“I would love that too, but wait. Wiping out the Sage along with the irresponsible onlookers would be fine, but we can’t have the Sage get desperate enough to hold a knife to Boo Boo’s defenseless throat. We have to hold off on a rampage until we’ve safely secured him.”

“You sound calm, but you haven’t calmed down at all! Let’s stop assuming the destruction of the inn town!! Oh, you tell her too,

Armelina!!”

“Yeah, if it’s a hostage you need rescuing, leave it to a police officer like me.”

Armelina was also obsessed with maps, so she reached for the bold slit exposing her thigh, pulled out a parchment map of the inn town, and spread it out on the floor.

“Boo Boo was almost certainly brought into Girl’s Grill, but there’s still a lot we don’t know about the interior layout. And even if she’s provoking us, we can’t go marching in the front door to rescue him from the Sage. Not only do we know how much more powerful she is than us, that would also give her the opportunity she needs to hold a blade to his throat.”

“Then what are we supposed to do? We can’t just leave Boo Boo like this.”

“That’s why I’m hoping for your pure firepower since the blood is rushing to your head, Beatrice. You are the cornerstone of this rescue operation. Is that enough to get you motivated?” Armelina shrugged. “If we’re going to do this, the only way is to catch the Sage off guard. That means ignoring the front and back entrances and instead blowing a hole in the outer wall at just the right point to directly reach the room Boo Boo is trapped in. It would be best if the blast could also knock out the Sage and whoever else is inside, but I don’t know if we can expect that to work. After all, Beatrice claims she has every single Element completely covered, so you can’t get any damage on her.”

“But I thought we didn’t know the layout inside.”

“We don’t.”

Armelina pulled out another map.

They had visited Girl's Grill earlier that day, but they had only seen the main hall and powder room that customers were allowed to visit. The food on the menu, the speed at which it was prepared, the kitchen door they had seen, and the chimney visible from outside the building could all be used to estimate the location and size of the kitchen, but there were still a lot of unknowns, such as the food storehouse and the living space for employees. The Labyrinth ran directly below everywhere in Ground's Nir, so they could fortunately rule out the possibility of a deep basement structure.

"I've estimated the size of the unknown space based on the exterior of the bar, but we still need to fill in this map. Not to mention learning where the personnel are located and where Boo Boo is being held."

"So we have to send someone into the bar?"

"The Sage of course already knows what Beatrice looks like and she must know that Filinion and I are with you. We were eating at the same table, after all."

The lovely paradox who looked 10 gave a wink.

"So you need a guest she won't recognize? Should I go?"

"That would be great, but you have no reason to go. Girl's Grill is going to be preparing for their Boo Boo Butchering Show. At the very least, that's what the people in the inn town will think. All sorts of onlookers are going to be visiting the rumored bar to catch a glimpse of poor Boo Boo. The bar can't serve that many people, so all outsiders will be forbidden from going further inside. That means you can't get that close as only a customer."

"Then who would be best?"

Beatrice pouted her lips, called up her fire illusion Magic, and

connected a few frames with lines: the loathsome Sage, Sibyl, captured Boo Boo, and Beatrice's group who were planning to rescue him. But the frame for their undercover role was still empty.

Armelina winked as she answered.

"It has to be someone who sees Boo Boo as their enemy…no, who intensely hates him. The Sage has to be able to confirm that fact for herself. That will make it look natural for them to want to bargain for the chance to see Boo Boo butchered."

"…?"

"Well, just leave the selection to me. …I really don't want to let that beast out of her cage, but I guess it's necessary."

A knock came to the door.

Everyone looked in that direction, but Armelina alone did not look surprised. She had likely made the preparations already.

"Come in, Inoue. I'm guessing it wasn't easy."

"When I'm here, call me Huldra the cute Alchemist Cheerleader."

With permission granted, the Boo Boo-sized door opened to reveal a small girl of only 145cm with a characteristic mole under the eye. Her long pink hair was worn in twintails that swept out to the left and right, she was dressed in nothing more than a white and pink tank top and miniskirt with some leather pouches and small liquid containers disguised as colorful jewels, and she wore sandals with thin straps on her feet. It was unclear what affect the pompoms she held had. But despite her short height, she had quite a chest. It was a very irritating body type. And it was made all the worse by the Magical effect that caused glowing stars and hearts to fly around whenever she moved even slightly.

Beatrice did not know her.

Armelina casually provided some information.

“Oh, she’s made to piss you off, so don’t worry about it. She uses Alchemically-created makeup to adjust her Hate values and draw the enemy’s attention. Her job is to use shiny but powerless effects to lure the target over.”

“Ugh. You mean she wears equipment that negatively affects her?”

“She even makes decoy recovery magic poses that are nothing more than motions.”

Clothing was only Magic taking that form, so it played a role in adjusting one’s Parameters. That meant a general scan of someone’s clothing could give you an estimate of their Parameters…and this girl certainly seemed uniquely focused. It was like she had prioritized vanity over direct offense or defense.

And Armelina’s main focus was apparently not her.

“Where is she? We need her.”

“I know that, but try to be careful, okay? Back in the real world, she’s already caused enough trouble during probation to get sent back to juvenile hall and then plotted six different jailbreaks. After faking an attempted suicide, she was sent to the police hospital, manipulated a nurse into sympathizing with her, and then started to half-brainwash the nurse to increase her number of pawns. We intervened when she was just about to bite off the right ear of the kind but foolish counselor who was trying to support her.”

Filinion trembled as she listened to that story.

“Wh-who in the world are you talking about? I don’t know anyone like that.”

“Oh, but you do. We know her all too well.”

Armelina asked to have her brought in, so Huldra stepped aside as if clearing the way.

A solid footstep sounded from the entrance.

“Ah.”

Beatrice’s mind went blank.

She had created a few frames and lines using her fire illusion Magic. This would fill the final frame: whoever would make an undercover visit to Girl’s Grill.

But this?

The color blue stood before her eyes. Long hair had its volume further increased as gorgeous ringlet curls and it decorated the cruel lady’s ample body to give it a princess’s silhouette. But her torso was not contained in a noble corset. Instead, she wore a single cross-shaped sword contained in its scabbard. The sword was held to her body by several belts and her only other clothing was the sharp ice armor around her hips that looked something like a swollen skirt.

She had fully specialized in the Water Element, making her the polar opposite of Beatrice and her specialization in the Fire Element.

She was the new battle arena queen and the ruler of absolute zero.

“Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau!?”

“Well, can you see why anyone would accept that I have a powerful grudge against that Iberian Orc and the rest of you? And I was even deployed by the so-called Conference Room in order to ingratiate them to the Sage.”

The cruel hunter hid her mouth behind a fan of ice and laughed

wickedly.

“But at the same time, my higher ups were wiped out in the blink of an eye thanks to someone’s blitzkrieg tactics, so who knows if the Sage even received word of what happened to me. It happened right after I got back, so there was no real time for a report. Simply put, she has no way of knowing if I was captured or managed to escape.”

“…”

“So just relax and leave this to me. We are in this together, so let’s try to get along. Okay?”

Part 5

“I’ve negotiated with my higher up to have your sentence halved if this goes well. The Minister of Justice can’t ignore something as crucial as the Sage’s identity, after all. But it’s all over if you betray us here. You won’t just be sent back to juvenile hall. You will die here before even being sent back to the real world. Do you understand, Wildefrau?”

On the way to the inn town, Armelina gave a clear and concise explanation.

The sexy Ice Waterfall Princess smiled and shrugged.

“These exceptional conditions are actually making me concerned. You must know how skilled I am with Magic, yet you haven’t taken away my Shining Weapon or bound my arms and legs.”

“Yes.” The Fighter Priest smiled. “But that’s because we know a way of sending you to the afterlife without having to restrain you.”

“N-now, now.”

White Witch Filinion cut in while spreading her hands to either side of her face. The corners of her mouth stiffened a bit, but she somehow managed to form a smile.

“We need to work together to save Boo Boo, right? Tripping each other up with this strained atmosphere isn’t going to increase our odds of success. Let’s let our past issues just be water under the bridge, okay?”

“…”

Wildefrau silently but surprisingly smoothly turned her head to face the fluffy blonde glasses girl.

She started by rhythmically clacking her front teeth together.

“Gahhh!!!???”

And then she roared.

Beatrice immediately grabbed Filinion’s shoulders and pulled her back just in time for Wildefrau’s teeth to mercilessly snap together in the space filled with flowing blonde hair.

Hadn’t Armelina said this person had very nearly bitten off the right ear of a kind but foolish counselor?

“Inoue!!” shouted Armelina.

“I’m Huldra while I’m here.”

A metallic sound followed that almost foolishly calm comment.

That was when Wildefrau finally stopped moving. At some point, a trio of long and sharp metal claws with curved tips had jutted out from both of the Alchemist Cheerleader’s pompoms. They stopped

just before reaching the blue Ice Waterfall Princess's throat.

Those pompoms were for more than just cutely hiding her mouth. They were a Shining Weapon.

"Do you understand now, Wildefrau? You are still in chains."

The Ice Waterfall Princess's eyes were focused less on Huldra's claws themselves and more on the many Icons that appeared to wrap around her slender wrists.

"So it would seem. But if I know how long and thick the chains are, I can find a way around them. …Magic that does no damage but has a low chance of causing instant death? And have you forcibly increased the success rate using your Alchemy items? I see, I see, I see."

It was Armelina's turn to click her tongue.

For her, it would have been best to hold the prisoner in check without showing her hand. Suspicion and paranoia were the greatest chains. It had been necessary, but revealing this from the start still hurt.

Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina were joined by twintailed Huldra and ringlet-curled Wildefrau. They arrived at the inn town as a fairly large group, but despite the major incident occurring within, the orange-dyed town looked the same as always. The pleasant smells of dinner preparations came from all over. Of course, a lot of customers would have made their way to Girl's Grill, the bar where Boo Boo was rumored to be captured and confined.

As they approached the bar in question, they passed by a youth handing out parchment fliers that had likely been mass-produced using a letterpress printer.

"Extra, extraaaa! Girl's Grill will supposedly be preparing a super-

rare Iberian Orc while still alive!! This rare but ugly species hasn't been seen much, so eating one for dinner is sure to earn plenty of Experience Points. Watching this butchering show is sure to be worth delaying a visit to the Labyrinth!!"

"…"

"Don't glare, Beatrice. Act natural. If we can't blend in, we have no chance of rescuing him."

Before arriving too close to Girl's Grill, Beatrice's group of 3 parted ways with Huldra and Wildefrau. That monster being released into the wild was a frightening thought, but it would be a problem if the Sage or Sibyl saw the 5 of them together. If their connection to the Ice Waterfall Princess were revealed, they would lose their chance to infiltrate the bar.

"Welcome. Is it just the 2 of you? Then how about a counter seat?"

Hearing that familiar voice, Beatrice's group left the main road, circled around the back way, and entered the building next to Girl's Grill which would soon become a small battlefield.

"Bakeries are busiest from the middle of the night to the early morning. They mainly serve breakfast, lunch, and portable food for exploring the Labyrinth. They aren't made to serve dinner, so they'll let you have the place to yourself at this time of day if you pay enough Gears."

"Fwehhh. Police officers really do things differently."

"What did you say you were reserving the place for?"

" 'We don't want to see our sales going up just because of some popular shop that appeared out of nowhere, right? We're going to give them some trouble, so help us out.' Anyone who agrees to that isn't going to join the Sage anytime soon."

Armelina spread out a few parchment maps on the closed-up bakery's floor and began her preparations. In addition to the maps, she used Magic to open a midair frame made from thin, necklace-like chains and bubbles. It displayed an unsteady view of Huldra's face.

"Hey, can you hear me, chief? I linked the video to Wildefrau's vision."

"Perfect. The reception is good, Inoue. If you're ready, then get started."

They used a short-range communication method developed for use in the Labyrinth. The range was quite limited and was affected by the thickness of obstacles like walls, so it was not always useful. Still, it was reliable at times like this.

Beatrice used her fire illusion Magic to call up her frames and lines as she listened to Armelina and Wildefrau.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"That Girl's Grill receives large shipments of alcohol and herbs, but the food and drinks they actually serve aren't enough to go through it all. That means this is camouflage to hide something behind the scenes. Say you've taken over their supplier and make it look like you're trying to get in on the action."

Basically, Armelina's men had paid off and threatened the supplier to monopolize the inn town's alcohol, so Wildefrau needed to act like their boss.

"And I use my revenge against that Iberian Orc to spice things up?"

"I'm glad you understand. I want you to get in there and fill in the grayed-out spaces on the map. Confirm the layout of rooms, the distribution of personnel, the material and thickness of the walls,

and where Boo Boo is being confined. Try to build a rapport using the fact that you're both up to no good."

While counting off the list on her fingers, Armelina explained each condition in more detail.

It would all fall apart if Wildefrau screwed up, so they had to go at her pace.

"Also, you have Huldra to support you. She's linked us so that anyone you look in the eye will appear on our map from then on. You need to aim for Boo Boo, the Elf, and anyone else you see going in or out."

"Oh? But not the Sage herself?"

"Did you see the Screenshot?"

"Yes. Other than a slight difference in apparent age, they are identical. …To be honest, I still suspect you might be taking me for a ride."

"It's the truth. And make no mistake: Boo Boo is our top priority. And with the Sage's knowledge of Magic, we're assuming she can see through this. So even if you do find her, do not look her in the eye. Just act natural."

Beatrice looked to the wall as she listened to that exchange.

Even with the small path between buildings, it was less than a meter to the inside of Girl's Grill. That small distance felt like an infinite wall. She shuddered just thinking of Boo Boo laid out on a kitchen counter with a butcher's knife pressing against his belly.

"Calm down, Beatrice."

"But…"

“The new dish and the butcher show are probably just bluffs meant to draw in the people of the inn town. If what you said is accurate, then the Sage wants to fight some kind of monster deep below the ground. In that case, I can’t think of any reason for her to put any effort into this kind of show business.”

“But the inn town people think it’s happening. If Boo Boo struggles, breaks down a wall, and escapes, they won’t show any mercy. They’ll see it like a man-eating gator getting loose when it was supposed to be used as a rare ingredient. All of the level cap adventurers out there will be his enemy! The Sage is tormenting Boo Boo with her own Girl’s Grill and with the second barrier of people out there!!”

Beatrice was aware the blood was rising to her head as she spoke.

She was aware of it, but there was nothing she could do.

“And no matter why she did it, the Sage must need Boo Boo if she bothered to knock him out and carry him back to her base. Remember, we’re talking about that Sage! Whatever she’s trying to do, she’s the one who slaughtered the residents of the Iberian Orc village and gathered their corpses to create that monster she called Disaster!! Who even knows what kinds of awful things she’s going to do to Boo Boo!!”

“And that’s why we’re working so hard to stop her. Isn’t that right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice covered her face with her hands and White Witch Filinion gently touched her back.

This was Ground’s Nir, another world.

There were no laws and there was no document ensuring basic rights. It was an island of verbal promises. And even if those things did exist, a Nonhuman like Boo Boo might not be covered.

And that was why they had to do this.

If no one else was going to protect him, they would have to save him.

“Conversations” held under extreme conditions could have great psychological influence. It would not even need to reach the level of Stockholm syndrome. What would happen if he was left all alone in a kitchen prepared for use on him and the greatly powerful Sage continually whispered in his ear? A frightening voice, a kind voice, an angry voice, and a tearful voice could all be used as weapons to shake him psychologically.

The Sage had acquired Disaster through twisted methods.

And she knew Boo Boo’s past very well. She could fine-tune what she said specifically for him. It was like an external cyber-attack made by an engineer who already understood the internal vulnerabilities. It was possible she would use his likes and his trauma to destroy his personality.

Meaning she could attempt something akin to brainwashing.

(I won’t let her.)

Beatrice could imagine the empty shell of an Iberian Orc fighting as the Sage's pawn until he rotted away and fell apart like Disaster had.

(I won't let that happen to kind Boo Boo!!)

"…"

She removed her hands from her face and coldly faced the world once more. After a moment, she made an announcement in a horribly low voice.

Yes, she had made up her mind about everything.

"Let's get started. …No matter what happens, we will rescue Boo Boo."

Part 6

Boo Boo awoke to the feeling of thick ropes scraping his skin. He blinked his eyes, but he had no recollection of how he had ended up like this. He saw a cold stone ceiling he did not recognize and his nose detected a metallic scent. The air felt stagnant, so he could tell he was enclosed inside something.

He was on top of a cart.

He tried moving, but the ropes were thicker and tougher than he thought. He had never seen vines this thick even in the forest.

"I used Ground Spider silk. I've heard of thin bulletproof equipment being made from spider silk, but maybe it's just crass to talk about that after traveling all the way to another world."

“…”

“Hi, Boo Bo. That took longer than I thought. Maybe I put off knocking you out a little too long.”

He heard a female voice. It was the Sage.

She did not wear the same red armor and miniskirt as Beatrice. Instead, she wore an odd outfit made by adding a corset and decorative sleeves to thin sleepwear to make it look vaguely waitress-y. Her flowing straight hair had been remade into twintails. Perhaps due to growing up from the girl form Boo Boo was used to, he was left with an entirely different impression.

She looked unfamiliar.

And even though it was clearly too large for a human to handle, she easily held a Shining Weapon that looked like log or steel beam. But that was hardly surprising when the Sage herself had been the one to leave Boo Boo with that weapon after sealing the slaughtered Iberian Orcs’ souls inside.

Casually swinging that down here would likely break restrained Boo Boo in half along with the cart below him.

He gulped, but the Sage shook her head.

After passing the Shining Weapon back and forth between her right and left hand, it gave a sudden roar and drew a flowing silver line in the air. The thick and seemingly unbreakable ropes were instantly severed. They were cut, not smashed and broken. This was the unbelievable technique of using weight and speed to “cut with a blunt weapon” that Disaster had demonstrated before. No, perhaps it was the Sage who had taught it to Disaster.

Not even Boo Boo could reproduce that extreme technique.

This was not complicated and confusing Magic. Just like when she

had knocked him out with a single fingertip, the Sage was skilled enough to overpower an Iberian Orc using pure martial arts.

“Yes, it does have a lot of small scratches, but it’s still in extremely good condition. That shows just how well you took care of it, Boo Boo. As the one who gave it to you, I’m pleased to see that.”

She spoke like she was chopping up a fish to check on the sharpness of a knife. And yet that one attack had inarguably shown the difference in their skill.

“You can have it back. That weapon is like a part of your body, isn’t it? You must not be able to relax without it.”

She then casually handed the Shining Weapon to her prisoner. He finally got up from the cart with his head full of questions. He generally trusted what people said, but even he found plenty about the Sage’s actions he could not trust.

Returning the weapon was not a problem for her.

She was implicitly stating that she was 100% confidence in her ability to strike back without batting an eye even if he made a surprise attack with the Shining Weapon.

Boo Boo looked around. His heart may have naturally desired an exit. But there were no windows and he could not see outside. One wall contained a single human-sized door and another contained a set of double doors which was large enough for the cart to pass through. The wooden barrels and boxes lined up in a corner of the room suggested it was a storeroom, but that was not all.

In the center of the room was a hole large enough for Boo Boo to fit through. It formed a perfect circle. It was surrounded by oddly-shaped glass containers and several tubes extended into the hole from those.

Of course, everyone knew what slept below Ground's Nir: the Labyrinth which irregularly changed shape like a living creature.

Only the humans ever went there and Boo Boo himself never would have if not for Beatrice's invitation.

"What…are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing? This was not easy, let me tell you. When I calculated out the coordinates on the map, they turned out to be right in the middle of the inn town. And I needed an unnatural amount of alcohol and herbs to interfere with the Labyrinth. Thanks to that, I had to open a bar and pretend to be a waitress. Man is a real job ever hard. I'm impressed anyone can keep this up on a daily basis."

The Sage dodged the question, but she did not seem intent on hiding it.

Since she had taken Boo Boo to the center of her secret, she was clearly enjoying showing it off. She was like a mother asking her small child to guess what was inside their birthday present. Or perhaps like a predatory woman luring a man into bed by lying there in nothing but some seductive nightwear that showed off her bodylines.

Yes, she was enjoying this conversation held under extreme conditions.

"You seem to be mistaken about something, so let me be clear: I am not trying to stop what you're trying to do, Boo Boo. You just have to do what you want and I'll do what I want. If it ultimately surrounds Ground's Nir, the great foe that slumbers in the ground's depths, then the more options we have, the better."

"Ground's…eh? But isn't that what Beatrice and the others call…?"

“Yes, this must be terribly confusing. And that is why I invited you here.”

The Sage clapped her hands in front of her chest and smiled.

Then she made a suggestion.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have much time. The world is in a much, much graver situation than I thought. That is why I have changed my MO and stepped out into the open. There are more important things than hiding.”

“?”

Boo Boo honestly found this person frightening.

But it saddened him that she blurred together with a kind person from a distant memory: that person who had looked sad even while smiling.

“Let’s talk, Boo Boo. We should share what information we have. By eliminating what isn’t needed and avoiding duplicate efforts, we can more efficiently surround that monster. I am asking for your help in order to save everyone, Boo Boo.”

Part 7

“Cheh, they sure closed early today. Did someone pay a bunch to rent the place out? That’s awful. We’d finally found a nice place and now it’s home to some fat IT guys with nothing but money going for them?”

“Don’t worry. They’re probably just dealing with that new ingredient. They need time to prepare for the big event. …Speaking of which,

can you really eat that thing's meat?"

"Well, if it's about easily getting a ton of Experience Points, not being able to eat it might actually be more effective, right?"

The view in the floating frame moved past some men leaving the bar. A closed sign hung from the entrance, but there was still a large crowd gathered around. The talk of using an Iberian Orc for food seemed to have interested a lot of people.

"Hey, who is that…?"

"Oh, no. Isn't that the Ice Waterfall Princess?"

"That level cap woman is a part of this? What kind of connections does this bar have?"

It was amusing how easily the wave of people parted. Beatrice was often feared by those around her, but the reaction to Wildefrau was different. They seemed to be looking at her like unexploded ordnance that could go off at any time.

(So this is the Ice Waterfall Princess's view. This is how she views the world…)

Time passed as Beatrice thought about that. She entered the bar that had closed before the sun had fully set and she whispered in a jocular way.

"I'm going in. Sit tight and wait for good news, everyone."

"We can hear your breathing and pulse, Ice Waterfall Princess. Don't think you can fool us just by controlling your voice."

That may have been a bluff, but Beatrice guessed the threat would noticeably affect her heartrate if she tried anything. Not that she thought Wildefrau was lacking in guts.

The Ice Waterfall Princess was on the main floor where the counter seats and tables were now empty. Beatrice and the others had already seen this area.

And their opponents were not about to let outsiders enter the back of the bar.

“So.”

The response came not from the Sage but from the Elf waitress named Sibyl. Unlike normal(?), the twintailed girl seemed somehow rude as she sat directly on a table.

She peered into Wildefrau’s eyes.

“What is the meaning of this? Why would you close during prime dinner hours?”

“Oh,” said Armelina as she tossed a metal pin with a colorful head onto the parchment map spread out on the floor.

Instead of sticking in or rolling, it stopped while standing straight up from a table on the map’s main floor.

“I’ve linked to her biomagnetism. Sibyl has been Marked by the green pin. We need to thank Huldra’s support and Wildefrau’s cruel luck. Now we can follow her actions.”

“Hehh. I see you put a scratch on the head to give it a front and back side. It’s not exactly precise, but we can see which way the target is facing, can’t we? That’s perfect for infiltrations.”

“Although it’s not all that much help since we don’t know the angle or distance of her effective visual range. Still, if we’d had Huldra with us, we wouldn’t have had to walk around endlessly in that snowy mountain where we fought Wildefrau.”

Meanwhile, a deadly conversation was being held in the next

building over.

“I simply decided this was something you wouldn’t want getting out. And if we settle this soon, you will still have enough time to reopen at sunset, won’t you?”

“I don’t know where you heard about this, but it seems you have threatened all of our alcohol suppliers.”

“Oh, dear. But surely you’ve built up enough of a stock to keep the doors open even if you don’t receive another drop for a month. What are you so worried about?”

Filinion frowned as she peered into frame made of thin chains and bubble film.

“Umm, is this going well or not?”

“It’s going very well. It honestly helped a lot that Sibyl looked Wildefrau in the eye. That means Wildefrau didn’t have to put any effort into Marking her. Besides, if we say what we want right away, Sibyl can use that against us by piling up more and more things she demands in exchange. If you ask someone for the vaccine they’re holding because you need it to save your daughter’s life, who knows what they’ll demand of you. The standard negotiating tactic is to provide the illusion that you know your opponent’s weakness while not letting them know what you want. Meaning…”

“We can’t let her know that we want to know the full layout of the bar, that we want to know where everyone inside is posted, and that we want to save Boo Boo, so it would be best to have her invite Wildefrau into the back of the bar while thinking it’s for another purpose altogether, right?”

And they already had what they needed to do that.

“Anyway,” said Wildefrau. “I don’t know what you’re using it for, but you need a lot of alcohol, don’t you? Yes, I certainly don’t know what you’re using it for.”

“…What are you trying to say?”

“Just think of me like a new supplier. I can’t have my client drying up before our negotiations are complete, so how about I provide a small supply in advance? Although it might not be nearly enough for your purposes.”

“Hmph,” snorted Sibyl. She clearly did not like this, but had no choice but to play along.

She gestured toward the back of the bar with her chin.

“Then come this way. As you know, our time is limited.”

“Um,” said Filinion. “What are they actually doing back there?”

“Let’s just pray they aren’t marinating a gigantic Iberian Orc in alcohol.”

Armelina’s response was in very poor taste, so Beatrice sulkily poked at her head.

There were a few wooden boxes piled up in front of the bar. They contained the high-proof drinks that Huldra and more of Armelina’s protégés had gathered from around the inn town. They would normally be difficult to carry around by hand, but the Ice Waterfall Princess could freeze the bottom of the boxes so they would easily slide as she pushed with a single hand.

But Sibyl stopped her.

“You’ve frozen the bottom with Magic?”

“Surely you aren’t suggesting the temperature change will affect the

quality of the drinks.”

“No. With the exception of wine or brandy that live on in the bottle, the quality won’t be affected unless you go as far as fully freezing it.”

She initially agreed, but then…

“However, I seem to recall the documents I received from the Sage saying the Ice Waterfall Princess is actually a girl of around 14. From what I have heard of human customs, you do not drink alcohol at that age.”

Oh, no, thought Beatrice as her heart jumped unnaturally in her chest.

They had given Wildefrau thorough preliminary knowledge to better deceive their opponents, but that had instead made things look more unnatural. It would all fall apart if Wildefrau could not dodge a follow-up question about how she knew so much about it.

But…

“Pff.”

“?”

“Ah ha ha ha!! Oh, excuse me. But have you never considered who you might be serving here? This is Ground’s Nir; the laws and treaties of earth do not apply here. In a lawless land where murder and involuntary manslaughter in the Labyrinth are entirely overlooked, I never thought someone would actually criticize me for something like alcohol or smoking. Pwa ha ha!”

“Oh, so that’s it.”

“Yes, I might not look it, but I am quite bad. Enough so that I’m willing to threaten you for profit☆”

Beatrice breathed a sigh of relief.

They were finally inside the bar. Wildefrau cut across the floor while sliding the stack of wooden boxes and she entered the employees only area using the door Sibyl opened for her.

“That’s step 1.”

Armelina snapped her fingers and looked to the map on the floor.

“She’s pretty good at this, but that’s exactly why her cruel intellect caused us so much trouble in the snowy mountain.”

“2 doors up front and 1 in the back?” said Wildefrau. “Which one do we need?”

“The one in the back.”

Wildefrau had to have nerves of steel to walk into a building with no escape. These people had publicly announced their intention to chop up the powerful Iberian Orc they had carried there. If she was caught off guard and knocked out, she could always have her corpse “disposed of” in the same way and served as a mystery stew or hamburger. The rules here were different than on Earth where forensic investigations could perform nano-level fiber analysis or detect the luminol reaction of a bloodstain even after it was washed away 10 times with a neutral detergent.

“Once we save Boo Boo, I need to reassess my opinion of her.”

“Yeah. I said her sentence would be halved, but if we do manage to capture the Sage alive here, she might be able to get a full pardon.”

Meanwhile, Wildefrau arrived in the back room.

As expected, it was a perfectly normal small stone room. There was no furniture and there were wooden boxes and barrels lined up by the walls. It was probably a storeroom.

“Armelina, there’s a door to the east and a window to the west. That’s probably right across from this bakery.”

“I know that.”

“By the way,” said Sibyl as the Ice Waterfall Princess pushed the boxes over to the wall. “I’m really not sure what you hope to accomplish here.”

“Oh? How can you say that after stealing my prey from me? I had thought revenge was a fairly popular desire.”

“When someone suffers a painful defeat, they can take 2 paths: strike back with even more force, or flee. Why are you so intent on seeing your nemesis once more? I am saying I do not understand that passion. From an objective viewpoint.”

This riddle was a hard one.

People’s hearts had no physical form. For example, what could you do if someone asked for physical evidence to objectively confirm your love? Would you give them handmade chocolate on Valentine’s Day? Or would they be convinced by a diamond ring that cost 3 months’ worth of your salary? And in this case, the other person would maliciously view anything like you were a marriage scam artist. It would take a lot to convince them.

But it was all over if they could not overcome this.

No matter what, they had to objectively convince Sibyl that Wildefrau wanted to kill Boo Boo herself.

Beatrice added a new entry to her frames and lines made from fire illusion Magic. They needed Sibyl’s trust. How could they support Wildefrau to gain that?

(This will at least require me, Filinion, and Wildefrau. And Huldra if necessary!)

They had to act now.

No matter how long they dragged this out, they had at most a minute.

“Wh-what are we going to do?”

“Armelina, tell Wildefrau to drag this out however she can. Filinion, if you have nothing to do, then help me out.”

“Eh? Eh?”

“The Sage’s group will probably have received a report saying we and Wildefrau fought. But they don’t know how exactly that turned out. The Ice Waterfall Princess said they were taken out without time for a report, but even if they did, the Conference Room wanted to get on the Sage’s good side by reporting we had been defeated. They would have been going on and on about how amazing the Ice Waterfall Princess was and how she was going to defeat us at such-and-such a time, but once it ended in failure, they wouldn’t have been in a rush to apologize. The more details they provided, the more they would disappoint the Sage.”

“Are you saying the Sage and Sibyl don’t know how exactly our battle ended?”

“We showed up at Girl’s Grill during the day, so they can more or less guess that Wildefrau retreated. …But they don’t know whether or not she was captured. We can make it look like the Ice Waterfall Princess was still walking freely around Ground’s Nir and then caught us in a surprise attack at some later date.” Beatrice took a slow breath. “We need something that shows off Wildefrau’s violence. Our short-range communications can reach her, so we can transmit it to her Shining Weapon. Let’s fake a Screenshot. If we make a secret photo album that will horrify Sibyl, we’ll have the ‘objective proof’ we need.”

Of course, Wildefrau specialized in the world of snow and ice. But there would not have been any reports of a white hell appearing in the inn town, Labyrinth, or anywhere else with a lot of witnesses. In that case…

“Let’s use the same environment as last time. We’ll say she surprise attacked us in a snowy mountain to the north. When there’s already a blizzard, a frozen hell won’t stand out and won’t make the news.”

That said, they did not have time to head to the mountains now.

Filinion used her Mixing skill to create a magic potion that produced ice for treating bruises and Armelina shattered the ice and spread it out in a corner of the bakery out of the way of the maps. They just needed enough of the white stuff to hide the floor.

“A bakery will have ketchup, right? Are there any raw eggs? Mix the ketchup with the egg white to get the stickiness and coloration right and then make it look like my face has been smashed in.”

“Why do you know how to do that off the top of your head when you can’t actually cook anything?”

“Shut up. Not all of us are experienced cooks from eating alone all the time.”

“Ahh!?” roared the flaaat girl, but Beatrice ignored her and got back on topic.

“Filinion, you’ve seen a lot of injuries as a healer, so you make sure it looks right. I’ll lie on my side and hide my face, so you use the ketchup to make a nice puddle. If it can’t be seen from outside, they won’t know how bad it is.”

“A-are you sure this is a good idea?”

Filinion sounded nervous as she formed L-shapes with the thumb

and forefinger of her hands, combined those into a frame, and photographed Beatrice from multiple angles. Some of the angles were no good because the bakery wall could be seen, and it was possible an expert would be able to tell this was actually indoors from the reflections of the light source.

“Hey, we saved a few Screenshots from that northern snowy mountain, right? Use those for reference.”

“Hmm, the position of the light source was something like this and I think the coloring needs to be a bit bluer.”

“Beatrice, if you don’t hurry up, the snow will melt from your body heat!”

In the end, a lot of it (including how the photo was presented) would be up to the Ice Waterfall Princess’s acting skills.

“Well, that’s done. Now to send it to Wildefrau’s Shining Weapon…”

While cut off from support inside the bar, Wildefrau had to muster all of her strength to suppress a reflexive frown.

The problem was the faked photo sent by her allies(?).

(This is garbage!!)

The Screenshot did look fairly authentic. They had likely adjusted the light source based on actual Screenshots of the snowy mountain. But when someone was lying down in a real blizzard, the snow would gradually melt around their skin and the subzero air would refreeze it, making something closer to ice than snow. There was a chance Sibyl would notice that sort of detail.

“This is the photo?”

Sibyl sounded somehow mocking as she viewed the Screenshot displayed on a frame of thin ice floating in midair. Wildefrau did not know what that meant. They had increased the noise as much as possible to hide the details, but that might clue Sibyl into their “fear”.

Wildefrau just had to make it work.

She kept a smile on her lips and forced her next words out.

“Yes, this is part of my Surprise Attack Collection. My SurpriseColle☆”

But Holy Swordswoman Beatrice was not satisfied with just that.

She had more to say.

“Oh, Filinion, you have a decent stock of recovery potions, right?”

“Y-yes. But why-…?”

The glasses cow’s question came to a sudden stop when Beatrice punched her own cheek as hard as she could.

She wore a metallic gauntlet that covered her wrist to her fingertips and had joints necessary to move the hand. The weight and solidity of her fist were greater than even a hammer. The bakery gradually filled with a rust-like smell that would never come from ketchup or tomato puree.

“Peh.”

Regardless, the Holy Swordswoman spat something out into her palm.

It was one of her back teeth.

She now had the final item for her collection of frames and lines produced by fire illusion Magic.

“That storeroom has a window to the back alley, right? Have the Ice Waterfall Princess get in place so I can secretly pass this to her. Your subordinate named Huldra is good at adjusting her Hate value, right? Have her cause a commotion out in front of the bar. If she trips and falls while holding a bunch of Gears and they scatter everywhere, the gallery watching from a distance will start fighting over them. The Sage and Sibyl don’t know about her, so even if they find out who did it, it won’t be a major problem.”

“W-wait.”

“I know. Keep me informed which way Sibyl is looking based on the pin on the map. If we can do that, then they might be able to as well. I want to avoid having the Sage pursue me at length if I’m spotted.”

Armelina had not been trying to stop her like that, but Beatrice may have been losing sight of herself because her anger was even greater than she thought.

“If Wildefrau shows Sibyl what she’s been rolling around in her mouth like hard candy, even the Sage’s companion will shudder. Photographs can look very different depending on the impression given to the person looking at them. Even a stain on the ceiling can look like a face if it whispers to you for long enough. The Screenshot alone might have been doubtful, but this is sure to convince anyone that she really did smash my face in and take a souvenir with her and that she’s obsessed enough to want to kill Boo Boo herself.”

Part 8

“In other words, the Iberian Orcs were always a special species that lived for that purpose.”

In a dreary and windowless room, the waitress Sage smiled while sitting on a random wooden box.

“Ground’s Nir, the monster in the ground’s depths. If it fully activates and reaches the surface even once, all animal and plant life clinging to this island will be annihilated. To ensure that doesn’t happen, they monitored the movements of the Labyrinth and, when they sensed the limit approaching, used the full power of their numbers to put a stop to the monster’s birth cries. At the turning points of each age, there were many sacrifices, but that species of heroes continued fighting to protect everyone. That is your true identity.”

“Squeal…”

“Is that too much to believe all at once? But think about it rationally, Boo Boo. Your body contains such great strength. Why? There is a reason for all things. And if there is a reason for you to have built up such great strength, isn’t it natural to assume that is to combat a powerful enemy?”

He had been told the Labyrinth was a very scary place.

And he had been told the humans had suddenly appeared one day and were challenging the Labyrinth to prevent some kind of evil from rising from the depths of that hole.

“Ah ha ha. They only said that because you were little and they didn’t want to scare you. It would have been frightening to hear you were destined to fight a monster from deep below ground, right? They probably wanted to reveal the truth in stages. They would have started with the Labyrinth, then the monster, then the existence of a system to oppose that monster, and finally that you were part of the group meant to carry out that role.”

“If that’s true…” hesitantly began Boo Boo.

The Sage had cut the powerful ropes binding him and returned his familiar Shining Weapon. That implicitly stated that she could handle everything just fine even after he was freed.

She could kill him at any time if he resisted.

That was what it meant.

“Who are they? Why do they want to make everyone suffer?”

“Hee hee. You might have that backwards.”

“?”

“First of all, the island of Ground’s Nir itself is a giant armory. The life forms on the surface may have arrived to the island later and settled there, or you may be the descendants of life that formed here naturally. I do not know why the original Ground’s Nir wants to rise to the surface. But this island and the Labyrinth exist for it. To put it another way, once the ultimate weapon is complete, the factory is no longer needed. With its role complete, the facility will probably hand over all of its energy to the completed product and the armory itself will be reused as giant armor or a giant engine. In other words, the island will cease to be an island. It will no longer be an environment that can support life on its surface.”

“That can’t be…”

“But you don’t have to feel bad, Boo Boo. No matter which part came first, all of you were born here. So this isn’t about right and wrong. It’s a battle for survival.”

The Sage stopped there and pointed toward the large hole in the center of the room.

The mysterious device there sent a great many tubes into the giant

underground armory and provided those tubes with a constant supply of a potion created from lots of herbs and alcohol.

“I got this constructed faster than I expected. It sends an Alchemic potion – that is, a potion that affects metal – into the Labyrinth’s floors and walls to induce changes to the structure of the invisible gears and shafts. That will obstruct its work, but it’s only a delaying tactic. I doubt this can prevent the completion of Ground’s Nir.”

She then whispered through her beautiful lips.

“Unlike in the past, the Iberian Orc village has not kept up its numbers. If the monster appears now, no one can stop it. As things are, there is a 100% chance all life on the island will be annihilated. We must stop that no matter what.”

“But…that’s…but! I heard what Beatrice said, like she was confessing her own crime. She said you were mean to us and killed everyone in the village!! So how!? How can you look so sad when talking about it!?”

“I was asked by your elder. He said there was no sign of further growth, so the rusted village needed to be thoroughly destroyed to reset things. I have come this far regretting that decision every step of the way. The elder said the village’s numbers could be rebuilt around you, since you were the only healthy Iberian Orc left, but the monster’s completion is going to arrive first. Even after accepting so much sacrifice, both the elder and I judged things wrong.”

“Then…”

“That is why I cannot flee from the monster. I must defeat it to protect the peaceful days I promised the elder and the others. And I will do whatever it takes.”

Boo Boo thought quietly as he listened to something he did not

entirely understand.

This was definitely Beatrice here.

But something about her was fundamentally twisted. Yes, he sensed the same scent he had on Beatrice when she had given into her anger for Boo Boo and nearly killed the Elkiad leader. Or perhaps this was what would happen if she went beyond that and he could never hold her hand again.

“I will challenge the monster in my own way, no matter what that entails.”

She was smiling, but her voice tore horribly at Boo Boo’s heart.

It carried the unrestrained resolve of someone who had crossed a definitive line. Or perhaps it contained something that felt like a hopeless powder keg that had grown beyond the disaster it was meant to prevent.

“So please continue working at this in your own way, Boo Boo. There is no rule against having more than one method. If it can reduce the 100% odds of destruction even slightly, then the more methods we have, the better we can protect everyone.”

Part 9

There was a photo of a girl lying in a mountain blizzard with her face bloodily smashed in and the criminal was rolling a tooth around in her mouth.

“…I’ll believe you,” said Sibyl with absolute disgust oozing from the words. “Perhaps not in your character, but in your hobby.”

Beatrice had cracked open the window and handed over her own tooth and Filinion and Armelina had explained what had happened once she returned to the bakery.

“But in that case, I think you could have just reserved a seat,” added the Elf.

“Filming a movie and watching a movie are two very different things. Oh, my apologies. That example might be hard for a Ground’s Nir resident to understand.”

Beatrice placed a hand on her forehead and lightly shook her head.

“? My head feels heavy. I’m sleepy… Filinion, what did you use?”

“Of course you feel sleepy. Not even recovery potions are all powerful. It’s especially hard to maintain the balance and not leave a scar when healing a sensitive area like the face. It’s just like the difference between placing a splint on a broken arm and cosmetic surgery to fully reconstruct someone’s appearance. The difficulty level is entirely different. I can’t just return your HP value to normal and that will of course eat up more of your Willpower.”

…In that case, she could have just endured the pain in her jaw until they had rescued Boo Boo, but it was too late now. The recovery potion had already been absorbed and broken down by her body.

Meanwhile, Armelina’s frame showed Sibyl shrugging in her waitress uniform made by modifying a negligee. She said “this way” while prompting Wildefrau to leave the room.

“Oh, we need to pay attention. They might be headed to a new area.”

Armelina faced the map on the floor. The hallway had had 3 doors and there were still 2 they had not seen inside. If Sibyl showed Wildefrau to the one with Boo Boo in it, they would have the

information they needed, but if it did not, they still knew he was in the final one.

Once in the hallway, Sibyl opened her mouth once more.

“I’m sure you already know this since you shut off our supply of alcohol to intervene, but we did not open this bar in order to cook food and make money. Although the Sage and I do realize this was more fun than we had anticipated.”

“In other words, you do not want to hold an Iberian Orc cooking show if you do not have to?”

“Capturing him was all well and good, but when we tried slicing off a piece of his ear and eating it, it was too bitter and smelly to serve to customers. And it didn’t even provide many Experience Points. Or at least, that is what we planned to announce when canceling the event.”

“I see, I see, I see. Then I was right to force my way in here like this☆”

Sibyl sighed and pointed to one of the 2 remaining doors. It may have been one of the reused antique materials because the wood was a deep color that could not be produced just by rubbing coats of varnish on it.

Wildefrau opened it and found a kitchen. Unlike on Earth, there was no electricity and it used a hand-pumped well instead of plumbing. There was no refrigerator, but there was some sort of large water tank full of cold water. The only other difference was a system using firewood instead of a gas burner or oven. The rest was not much different from a normal restaurant kitchen. However, there were no cooks. The knives, spatulas, frying pans, pots, and other cooking equipment were all moving on their own. They almost looked like living creatures that merely took those shapes.

“This is all thanks to the Sage. It is apparently an experiment in reusing the Gimmicks that wander the Labyrinth. Although those mimic the structures of existing plants and animals.”

“Didn’t we humans try that and fail rather spectacularly? The remains of the giant laboratory are now used as a battle arena.”

“It depends on the human attempting it. The Sage can do it, even if the rest of you can’t.”

“Also…”

Wildefrau looked around and then turned back toward Sibyl.

The Elf stepped into the kitchen after her and used her back to shut the door.

“…Where is the Iberian Orc himself? You can’t just lead me on after all this. Or have you already shoved him into the oven?”

Wildefrau rapped lightly on the tiled wall bordering the next room.

Armelina snapped her fingers while watching through her frame.

“Bingo. It’s the room next to the kitchen! Based on the observations of the building’s exterior, it doesn’t seem to have a window, but we can blow a hole in the exterior wall. In fact, no window is a good thing because they can’t see us approaching.”

“Eh? Eh? B-but we still don’t have a pin for Boo Boo or the Sage…”

Filinion sounded confused, but Armelina did not care.

“I said the Sage might be able to see through it, remember? If they’re in the same room, there’s nothing more we can do. We need to shift from gathering information to an all-out attack. The fresher the information the better, so we need to prepare to blow through the wall before they can move him elsewhere on a whim!!”

“Wait, Armelina. Something isn’t right.”

Beatrice was correct.

In that case, why had Sibyl invited Wildefrau to the kitchen?

…Especially when there were knives and meat tenderizers moving on their own in there.

“I forgot to mention something,” said the Elf.

“Oh, no,” said Filinion. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“You seem to have mistakenly thought the Sage was satisfied simply receiving arrogant reports from those below her,” continued Sibyl. “But she actually sent out an observer to personally monitor the movements of that Iberian Orc. …Yes, I, the Royal Elf named Sibyl, was sent to secretly tail him.”

“Not good!” shouted Filinion.

“Thus, we know that you were captured after that disturbance in the mountains. You could not possibly have been free to make a surprise attack. So you can imagine my surprise when you produced that picture and tooth. Plus, this was not someone else’s tooth used as a decoy; it was the original’s. That tells me 2 things. #1: You, Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau, have some reason to deceive me in order to set foot in the back of this bar. That is not too surprising. It is entirely possible you managed a jailbreak and fled to Ground’s Nir in such a short time. But the problem is #2: For some reason, you have Beatrice’s support here. That makes your goal simple to guess. …And that is why I said I would trust your hobby but not your character!!”

Some were sharp blades and some were blunt weapons.

More than 100 knives, meat tenderizers, frying pans, and hand-cranked meat grinders all floated up into the air at once.

The Ice Waterfall Princess's special technique was to create an absolute zero environment and sap her opponent's strength until they froze to death, but that required gradually wearing them down from a safe zone outside their field of vision. She had trouble with direct combat. If she was exposed to a storm of blades and blunt weapons inside a small space, she could not create a white curtain of snow to blind her opponent. Her ultimate attack created an artificial universe of -273 degrees in which everything – including gas – froze, but even that might not work against fully inorganic Gimmicks. If they were built to function even in the vacuum of space, they would continue moving. Simply put, it was unknown just how much Wildefrau could defend against this.

"Dammit, prepare for the explosion! Beatrice, we're blowing that wall and saving Wildefrau. C'mon!!"

"W-wait! But what about Boo Boo!? Even if he's in the next room, that slight lag could lead to his death. The Sage might panic and stab him with a butcher knife when she hears the explosion!"

Filinion's words froze the atmosphere.

Throughout all of this, they had yet to see the Sage. That meant she had to be speaking with Boo Boo in that other room. She had full resistance to every Element, so they did not know how to defeat her. Even a surprise attack at full power only gave them a 50/50 shot at saving Boo Boo, so they could not afford any further difficulty.

But on the other hand, Wildefrau's life was in definite danger. Now that her cover was blown, Sibyl would show no mercy. What were they after, how much did they know, and how much of a threat were they to the Sage? Sibyl could either slowly slice her apart until she had the answers to those questions, or she could immediately kill her.

Blowing a hole in the wall to one room would definitely alert the

occupants of the other.

Saving one meant letting the other die.

They would lose their chance to rescue that other person.

The one holding the key to the detonation was the Fire Element level capper: Beatrice. Unless she agreed, the others had no way of overturning the decision.

She prepared two rectangular frames with her fire illusion magic.

One said Boo Boo. The other said Wildefrau.

“Wait, you’re kidding, right!? We can’t just abandon someone who helped us, Beatrice!!”

“Beatrice, you have to make the decision! Whatever you choose, make sure it’s a decision you won’t regret!!”

Part 10

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau smiled thinly while surrounded by the many kitchen tools thought to be installed with Gimmick structures.

There were 2 rooms and only 1 wall could be detonated from outside.

That meant the others were certain to rescue Boo Boo and leave her to die. Otherwise, their visit to this dangerous place would have been meaningless. They would not overlook that she had primarily been a disposable tool.

It seemed like a fitting end to her.

It had been Beatrice and the others who had decided to overcome Sibyl's questioning using the photo and the real tooth, but Wildefrau doubted she could have come up with a different idea on her own. She had grabbed the offered card without thinking, so she had to accept the result of that. In a way, this was only natural.

(Also…)

Wildefrau glanced over at Sibyl who had kept her distance but also used her back to block the sole escape route, but she was actually thinking about something else entirely.

(…I was kind of hoping this would happen.)

She had had no friends at school.

People had long kept their distance from those who could not distinguish dreams from reality.

The existence of Ground's Nir and Magic had prevented her from growing out of being such a person. It had even pushed her further in that direction. She had accepted that dreams could grow as dreams instead of crashing against the harsh wall of reality.

What did reality matter?

By gathering Pieces and dedicating them to the state, couldn't she be far more useful than a salaryman working his ass off or a housewife desperately making ends meet?

Once she made that excuse, she had lost her chance to fit in.

She saw no need to compromise.

Those with talents useful to society became known as great men. Reading through a biography on Nobel or Edison would show that

their lives were extremely unusual. Any normal person would frown upon hearing that Da Vinci actively and repeatedly performed autopsies to look inside corpses to find ideas for his works. But even in the age of the witch hunts when bigotry and discrimination were much stronger, he had not been criticized or punished. Everyone had decided he was necessary and feared losing him for no reason.

She had run further and further and further ahead.

By the time she had realized she was scared to look back, it had been far too late.

She could not return to who she had once been.

Once you started the tightrope walk, there was no turning back. Doing so would only increase the risk of falling. So she had had no choice but to continue on. She had had no choice but to trust that there was something waiting on the other side.

She had not wanted to accept that she was a freak.

So she had needed to become a genius.

And here was the result: a fall. After fearing the cruel wall of reality and instead immersing herself in a world of dreams within dreams, she would now lose her life in Ground's Nir. When someone had lost their place in reality, they could only live within dreams and die within dreams. So the only difference was whether it happened now or after she had aged a few decades longer.

She had brought this on herself.

But no matter how many times she was reborn, she doubted she could ever abandon this path.

…She had been sick of her real life. She did not even want to mention her real name.

Her family had been poor. But the terrible scores on her tests went beyond the side effects of poverty mentioned on talk shows. She doubted her scores would have changed even if her family had been wealthy. It was the same for her inability to keep up in class, to make friends, to follow the latest trends, or to even pick up on social cues. Shoving the blame off onto anything but herself had been convenient. If she defined it as a problem she was incapable of fixing, she could mentally free herself. She may have had no place in the real world, but that had not been a problem when she had another world to visit. And once she had found success there, she had been unable to stop.

If there had been another path, she would have chosen it long ago.

There was nothing else for her even if she did quit, so she had needed to hone herself here.

If this was a dead end for her, then so was everything else. In fact, she had done well to last this long. Yes, yes, better luck next time. That was all her life was worth. That was why no one had loved her, why no one had believed in her, why no one had relied on her, and why no one had shared in her joys or hardships.

She had not been back home in years. That was not something for a girl of 14 to say, but it was the truth. She still remembered the look on her parents' face when she had last seen them.

It was the look of disgust upon seeing something far too bright.

She was selfish and had an immature personality, but they could not get angry since she made dozens if not hundreds of times more money than them. They could have accepted that if they could at least claim they had raised her well, but Wildefrau's Magic was used to bring death. They could not stop her and they could not proudly claim her as their own, so they were unsure how to handle that economic monster that only continued to grow. That was the look on their faces.

When she had seen that, she had wanted to fade away into nothingness.

She had wanted to cut all ties to the real world and become something that lived only in her dreams.

So her demise would be met with indifference.

It was wrong to think there was anyone left who would shed tears of sorrow for her or who would burn with anger and come to save her. After all, she had given up on all that and cut those ties.

(I see…)

She recalled the intense emotion she had felt in the mountain blizzard when receiving a counterattack from someone she deemed beneath her.

She had assumed the blood was rushing to her head because they had prevented her from scoring a perfect game, but that may have been wrong.

(I may have been jealous of them for compromising with reality while still immersing themselves in Ground's Nir to that extent. I may have been jealous that they could live in a dream without destroying their bonds to others.)

But what did that matter?

Even if she was reborn 100 times, would she ever be able to pull off something like that?

With that in mind, Wildefrau gave her life over to the approaching storm of deadly blades.

That was the very same mistake she had made countless times already.

So…

And yet…

The wall behind Wildefrau seemed to swell out as it was blown up from outside.

Part 11

In that instant, Beatrice was not simply thinking about Wildefrau. She of course had not given up on rescuing Boo Boo.

And…

“Iberian Orcs like Boo Boo and Disaster have tough enough skin to deflect my flames to an extent. I know that from actual combat experience.”

“Beatrice?”

“It might be a little painful, but it won’t kill him. So why hold back?”

Q. There are two locked rooms, each with an important hostage within. You only have one chance at a detonation. Which one will you save?

A normal person would agonize over the decision and choose one while wracked with guilt. Or they would be unable to choose, run out of time, and lose both lives.

But the strongest were different.

The level cap group found another answer.

A. Why look at this on as small a scale as individual “rooms”? Blow

it all away at once and the number of rooms is of no consequence.

They had blown up the entire exterior wall that bordered the kitchen. The entire boxy building tilted a bit, but it had not entirely collapsed.

While on the lookout for the Sage in case she was entirely unharmed, Beatrice's group swiftly entered the building, but they soon found something entirely unexpected.

"Dammit, what is this!? There's no one in the final room either!! Not Boo Boo and not the Sage!!"

"B-B-B-B-B-B-Beatrice!? That's a big deal too, but, um!!"

Filinion's trembling voice was answered by several knives and icepicks bursting from the gray dust and cutting through the space which no longer had any concept of walls or rooms.

The Holy Swordswoman made a single swing of her rapier.

The sharp sweep of the Shining Weapon caused flames to burst out like blood from a wound in the world itself. They burned through all of the automatic weapons made from kitchen tools. The flames were large and powerful enough to annihilate even the dust from which the many weapons flew.

This was clearly overkill for protecting themselves.

The flames had been released to protect Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau who had been knocked to the floor by the blast.

"Don't just lie there! Stand up, Wildefrau!! Beatrice carefully calculated the blast, so you shouldn't even need one of Filinion's recovery potions!!"

"Eh? Ah?"

The Ice Waterfall Princess looked baffled, so Armelina continued as if using her words as a slap in the face.

“I don’t know your past, but we won’t abandon you now that we’ve accepted you into our group! We have a responsibility to help you!! The decision came down to Beatrice since she’s our fire user, but she didn’t compromise there. You did well. You completed your job. We will get you back alive! Before you start sulking, we have a final job to do, Wildefrau!! We have to escape from here!!”

It made no sense.

Had they brought further risk onto themselves for that obligation? Had they done it for a mad dog who would bite your ear off if you let your guard down? Even though blowing down just the wall to the final room would have given them a more surefire surprise attack?

“I don’t care.”

Beatrice immediate spat out those words when she saw the pleading look in Wildefrau’s eyes.

She turned her back on the lost girl, but that almost seemed to show off the magic circle there.

“I don’t know who you are as a human. But Boo Boo has a kind heart, so it would definitely hurt him if he knew we abandoned one of our own to save him. I wanted to avoid that. I did it for him!”

“…”

The explanation sounded dismissive, but one phrase pinpointed how they viewed Wildefrau: one of our own.

This was not a false smile plastered on their faces to get what they wanted. It had naturally slipped out in the middle of what amounted to an insult.

“So stand up, Wildefrau! Stand up and help us!! Either way, the Sage and Boo Boo aren’t here, so our only option is fighting Sibyl and getting the truth out of her. Since the surprise attack wasn’t enough, we have to make an all-out attack. The more people we have to rely on the better, even if that means someone like you!!”

Because Beatrice did not hold back at all, Wildefrau felt like those words provided a glimpse of the thoughts in her heart. People’s hearts had no physical form, so it was hard to provide physical evidence of what was inside them. That was what had put Wildefrau in such a bind here, but even she could understand this.

“Are…?”

They really did view the Ice Waterfall Princess as one of their own and someone they could rely on.

“Are all of you stupid…?”

“Maybe we are, but we’re asking for your help to save Boo Boo, Wildefrau! If you don’t agree to that, we really will abandon you this time. We’ll give up on you as not worth our time! If you don’t want that, then stand up and prepare to fight!! We don’t have time. The Sage might have heard the explosion, so hurry! We have to work together to defeat the Sage’s companion, get past this, and find a hint to reach Boo Boo!!!!!”

She was an honest-to-god idiot.

Despite the harshness on the surface, she was saying they had not given up on Wildefrau yet. Even after everything she had done to them on that snowy mountain, they still wanted to trust her. They really thought this was her final chance and that they could grab her hand and pull her up.

Wildefrau had wanted to fade away and cut off all ties.

But something had remained.

That one final line was hopelessly thin and yet it would not be broken.

“Heh, eh heh heh.”

When that came to mind, Wildefrau found herself laughing for some reason.

She had no real obligation to do as they said, but she found strength filling her legs after being knocked over by the explosive blast. Perhaps she feared losing whatever this was that was being offered to her.

She felt a calm elation she had never before experienced.

This feeling had never welled up within her when she had gathered great quantities of Pieces that brought about technological revolutions or when she had spent long periods of time wearing down whoever she had deemed to be weak.

“Fine, then. If you intend to make use of me – of Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau – then prepare yourselves! My attacks are not exactly precise and I might overdo things a bit and encase my allies in ice too!!”

Ultimately, she made an announcement in her usual style.

At the same time, small Icons lined up in the air alongside her fingers. A giant magic circle appeared in front of her chest at the center of the intersection point of the cross-shaped sword.

Yes, she might have spoken sharply, but another message had been woven into those words: I will work hard enough for you that you’ll get mad at me for overdoing it.

Part 12

“Hmph.”

At some point, a strange Shining Weapon had appeared in Sibyl’s hands. It was a curved wooden branch with a large crystal ball on the end and a thin string strung across it. It looked something like a bow or a staff.

In fact, she no longer wore the waitress uniform made from a red negligee. She now wore a green dress with the chest left wide open. Her twintails were also undone, giving her flowing straight hair.

“This is not quite as planned, but, well, it’s within the acceptable range. And it lets me wipe out all of the Sage’s enemies at once, so that’s good. Are you ready to face a Royal Elf?”

“Ready for what, you idiot? We’re well aware that Nonhumans born in Ground’s Nir can’t use the Shining Weapons or Magic designed for humans!!”

Armelina swung her metal staff and summoned the usual ball-and-chain onto the head.

If Sibyl was indeed bluffing, it would end here. They had a Holy Swordswoman who had mastered fire, a Fighter Priest who specialized in physical attacks, an Ice Waterfall Princess who was an expert in freezing attacks, and a White Witch who had thoroughly honed her logistical and healing techniques. A Party with that many level cappers in it even had a chance of challenging a Break News using direct firepower.

However.

“Laser Lock.”

Bright light came from the crystal ball on the end of the Shining Weapon Sibyl held.

As she pulled back the bowstring, the light gathered into a single arrow and then was mercilessly launched.

The violent beam of light tore through space.

It struck Armelina’s raised Shining Weapon and knocked her arms upwards. With her arms overhead, her body was left defenseless. And that had not been a coincidence. Sibyl had aimed for the weapon to ensure her target could be finished off with the next shot.

They could see several Icons standing up from the surface of the curved wood as if to provide monitors that visually supported Sibyl.

Then the Royal Elf spoke coldly.

“Check.”

“Dammit!! How can an Elf use human Mag-…!?”

The next shot was fired before Armelina could finish speaking.

Sibyl was both fast and persistent. The glowing arrowhead curved through space in order to stab through Armelina’s heart. If she tried to dodge, it would likely sharply correct its course to continue toward her vitals.

Or it would have if the glowing arrow had not been knocked out of the way by Wildefrau’s ice shield, the lantern shield which was combined with a giant hand.

“Don’t die just after saying something like that. Aren’t you going to rehabilitate me?”

“Sorry. And thanks!!”

“B-being honest only at times like this is cheating.”

This was quite an unusual side of the Ice Waterfall Princess, but they unfortunately did not have time to focus on that. A Royal Elf, and thus a Nonhuman born in Ground’s Nir, was operating a Shining Weapon and freely using human Magic. They had to think about how to respond to this situation.

(The Icons aren’t all that numerous. But that doesn’t mean she isn’t very familiar with the Magic. Just like Wildefrau, has she chosen a few she uses a lot and created shortcuts on a Palette!?)

Beatrice used her fire illusion Magic to call up a few frames and lines, but there were too many blanks to find an answer right now.

“Is it really that strange?” Sibyl looked quite calm for having broken through a supposed impossibility. “The Magic, Shining Weapons, and everything else you rely on like normal are no more than toys given to you by the Sage.”

“You’re kidding. Are you saying the Sage can tune a Shining Weapon for a Royal Elf!?”

“Prepare yourselves.”

Filinion had to be counted out, but Beatrice, Armelina, and Wildefrau all charged in toward Sibyl from different directions so they could not be targeted. And that included the Holy Swordswoman, who could fill a kilometers-wide field with hellfire on the level of a volcanic eruption, and the Ice Waterfall Princess, who could create a hell of absolute zero where even the air skipped past its liquid form and froze. With that much force in such a cramped space, not harming their allies was more difficult than defeating their enemy.

But that did not matter.

As soon as Sibyl turned the bow on its side and pulled the bowstring, the arrow of light spread out in a fan shape to produce not just 3, but more than 30 arrows. It was a lot like the magic crossbow used by Othinus, the Danish version of Odin. And while that bow was said to have slain 10 foes at a time, the deadly power of this weapon was 3 times greater than the god's weapon.

"Oh, no."

"No, Armelina!! The key is the crystal ball!!"

Armelina's eyes widened at Beatrice's warning.

A moment later, a beam of light thicker than 1000 arrows bundled together burst from the end of the curved wooden staff and tore through space itself. The Fighter Priest turned her metal staff into a small boat meant to crush her foes. She used it as a shield and bent her upper body back at the very last second. The thick steel boat was torn through like wet paper, creating a hole larger than a watermelon, and the beam partially tore away Armelina's breastplate as it passed above her bridge pose. Being so flaaat had effectively saved her. If the Holy Swordswoman had been even a second later to speak up, Armelina would have been pierced through.

Sibyl prepared to fire again at Armelina who had completely lost her balance and could not move from where she was, but Beatrice swung her rapier sideways from a distance.

It was not fire that burst out.

To avoid the incredible roar of a high-voltage current, Sibyl took a step back.

"Thunderbolt."

“I see. You vibrate the soot and smoke particles to produce a large quantity of static electricity. Fire is merely your starting point and you can reach other Elements, is that it? That almighty ability reminds me more and more of her. The method you use is quite different, though.”

Beatrice’s eyebrows twitched at the mention of someone who was not here, but she could not focus on that now. She first made sure the Fighter Priest was all right.

“Even your lucky breaks stem from your failures.”

“That was bothering me, so you didn’t have to say it out loud!!”

Armelina blushed and shouted back at her, but Beatrice simply used Magic to strengthen her Shining Weapon rapier’s cutting edge while attacking Sibyl.

“Metal Cutting!”

But Sibyl only took a single step back. She spun her odd weapon around, creating a large ring of light from the path of the crystal ball.

“Shield Method.”

The inside of the ring filled with identical light, creating a shield of destructive power. Even after leaving the staff, the ring of light rapidly rotated and deflected both Beatrice’s rapier and Armelina’s giant fist as soon as they touched it. A chill ran down the Holy Swordswoman’s spine. Sibyl was the kind of person to knock her opponent off balance and then take certain victory with her next attack.

She had not released her shield.

It rushed forward like she was using a tunnel boring machine to tear through human flesh.

“Ugeh!?”

“That’s just cruel!!”

Attacking the approaching shield with Magic would have little effect at this point. Beatrice sharply altered the direction of her rapier’s tip and destroyed the floor below their feet.

“Metal Jet!!”

A total of 8 lines of heat sliced through the floor like a hot knife through butter, dividing it into blocks. This would do no damage to Sibyl herself, but taking out the floor below her was bound to knock her off balance. And she was holding her own exceedingly destructive “shield” at the moment. If she tripped and came into contact with it, she would meet an even more tragic fate than someone who had an accident while using a chainsaw.

“!”

Sibyl pitched forward and came to a cautious stop without thinking, so Beatrice and Armelina used that opening to fall back. They had briefly kept their lives, but the basic threat remained. They could not win without finding a way around Sibyl’s malleable Magic.

“Th-that tunnel boring machine shield doesn’t look fancy, but isn’t it way too nasty? It hides her entire body, so there’s nothing we can do if she just keeps moving toward us!”

“Then we just have to think of a way to get damage behind the shield without breaking through the shield itself! It could be oxygen deprivation, a shockwave, or something acoustic!!”

Regardless, how was it possible for a Royal Elf like Sibyl to use human Magic? Had the Sage really given her a specialized Shining Weapon, just as she had claimed? Or was her identity as a long-eared Elf a bluff and she was only a human who had used her

Percentage-type Magic to adjust her appearance to look like an Elf?

(No…)

Beatrice added a few pieces of information to her frames and lines of fire illusion Magic.

That was not the only mystery here. First and foremost, where had the Sage and Boo Boo gone? And how had Sibyl changed out of her waitress-style negligee into a green dress? For that matter, could they really take her word for the alleged fact that the flying knives and meat tenderizers were perfect recreations of the Gimmick structure courtesy of the Sage? She would have had no reason to tell her enemies the truth.

It all seemed contradictory at first, but it had to all be explainable under a single set of rules.

At this point, Sibyl would not waste her time with silly games. It had all looked like separate phenomena to Beatrice and the others, but it had to have all been fully optimized from Sibyl's point of view.

But then what was it?

Where was the core of the issue being hidden?

"…So that's it."

Was it due to those muttered words, due to the smile on her lips, or due to the new frames she created and connected with several lines?

Sibyl frowned suspiciously while glaring at her, but that no longer mattered.

"Rising Sun."

Explosive light radiated from the crystal ball on the head of Sibyl's

raised weapon.

And…

“Laser Lock.”

“Oh, no! Something’s coming from behind that bright curtain! And the attack is hidden within that identically colored light!!”

Some English textbooks wrote the answers in red and placed red cellophane over the page to hide them. This was the same. If an arrow or shield of light attacked from beyond all of that light, they would be unable to see the timing or path of the attack.

Beatrice and the others would only be able to stand there as they were picked off.

Or so it seemed.

However.

A moment later, a high-pitched noise rang out as Beatrice’s rapier mercilessly knocked down Sibyl’s arrow of light despite the glowing smokescreen.

Part 13

Filinion, Armelina, and Wildefrau were not the only ones surprised.

Royal Elf Sibyl was of course the most shocked to have her supposedly surefire attack so easily deflected.

(No, it couldn’t be. Was it just a coincidence?)

She drew the bowstring once more and fired multiple glowing

arrows in quick succession. Not all of them flew in a straight path. Some curved in from the right, some swooped up from below to target the jaw, and some shot past Beatrice's shoulder only to make a sharp U-turn. The ever-changing acrobatics surpassed the concept of a bow and behaved more like a living creature.

But none of it mattered.

Without even turning her body all the way around, Beatrice used just her right hand to turn her rapier into a silver glow that sliced through the air and knocked down all of the arrows targeting her vitals.

(It wasn't!! Then does she really get it!?)

"Whether or not you were given a Shining Weapon for a Nonhuman Royal Elf, I doubt you would be able to use Magic. The key to Magic is Experience Points, which are properly seen as the experiences humans from Earth have in another world. Magic comes from changing using the device to change the target of those Experience Points. So with or without a Shining Weapon, you could never earn any Experience Points as long as you remain in Ground's Nir."

"…"

"In that case, how can you use Magic? No, how are you making it look like you're using Magic? It's still only a theory, but every Nonhuman supposedly has a trait that differentiates them from humans, right? We refer to that as their species' unique Skill. If so, then my guess would be what looks like Magic here is really a phenomenon reliant on your Skill. Yes, for example…"

"Laser Lock!!"

Sibyl refused to let her say anymore, so she drew the bowstring even tighter and launched an arrow of light. But the Holy

Swordswoman swung her rapier to accurately strike it down before continuing.

“Perhaps you materialize the residual thoughts left in objects. So instead of using Magic, you would be drawing out a visual of the human who used that Magic.”

Sibyl’s words caught in her throat.

How was Beatrice able to deflect these arrows of light that freely bent every which way as they accurately targeted her vitals? That was all the proof one needed that she had seen through Sibyl’s tactics.

“In other words, you aren’t calculating the arrows’ paths here and now. You have a limited number of past arrows to choose from and you select one with a useful path to recreate. You check where your opponent is standing and then adjust your own position to be in just the right spot to hit them using a past attack.”

Sibyl’s attacks were all flying along known paths. Once she used her Magic in front of Beatrice’s group once, it would only ever look like she was repeating the same thing. Even if she blinded them with light, her attacks were simple to block as long as they got the timing right. It was no different from getting the rhythm right while swinging the bat in front of a pitching machine that launched balls at set intervals.

“The knives and meat tenderizers flying around the kitchen on their own were the same. They had nothing to do with Gimmicks. You were only summoning the residual thoughts to reproduce the movements their former owners had given them. Of course, that means they were also thrown to kill someone, so that’s not exactly something worth celebrating.”

Once she had entered battle mode, Sibyl had changed from the waitress-style red negligee into a green dress, but that too was the

same.

In fact…

If the waitress uniform itself had been formed from residual thoughts…

“And the final question: why did Boo Boo and the Sage disappear from this bar?” said Beatrice. “That was what we assumed happened, but we were wrong.”

She spun her rapier around to point it toward Sibyl.

And she gave the answer revealed by her many frames and lines of fire illusion Magic.

“The very bar we first entered as customers was no more than an illusion created by summoned residual thoughts. The actual popular bar exists somewhere else. Am I wrong?”

It had been packed with customers.

Plenty of food had been served and they had eaten it just fine.

But what if the entire bar had been a lie? What if everything they ate with a smile and stored in their stomachs had been ghosts of the past? Besides, the Sage and Sibyl had been selling Buffs to support people’s Magic. It did not matter if that was “real” or not. Everyone had seen the Magic rings in their drinks, grabbed them, equipped them, and actually received their effects, hadn’t they?

The “range” of that had merely been expanded outwards a bit.

“Wait, what does that mean?” Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau looked back and forth between Beatrice and Sibyl. “So she’s summoning memories of Magic in order to use it? Then if we destroy the object those memories are contained inside, we can finish off Sibyl!? Like her Shining Weapon maybe!?”

“!!”

Without thinking, Sibyl adjusted her grip on the fusion of a staff and bow, but…

“No, she wouldn’t hide it somewhere so simple.”

It was that comment from Beatrice that really did fill the Royal Elf’s heart with ice.

She could no longer fool them. She could not throw off their aim with bluffs or tricks.

“As long as it contains the residual memories of the person who used the Magic, it could be anything, so it doesn’t have to be the Shining Weapon. Besides, I doubt she would show off her lifeline like that or readily use it to clash with my rapier or Armelina’s ball-and-chain. If it happened to crack or break, she wouldn’t be able to fight any longer.”

“Th-then what is the core?”

“It would have to be within arm’s reach and something she kept nearby so she could always draw out its residual memories. And in battle, it would be as important as her own life, so she would even put herself in danger to protect it.”

Beatrice created 8 balls of light around herself.

This Magic was named Metal Jet. With a diameter of a meter, each one could extend for several kilometers with the force of a chemical warhead capable of burning through a tank, so they felt a lot like laser beams.

She aimed the tip of her rapier. It seemed pointed at Sibyl’s nose, but it was actually a little off of that.

The final blank was something found everywhere here.

The several frames and lines pointed to something nearby but distant.

Yes…

“That door you’ve kept your back to. That was secretly taken from the Next Voyager ghost ship where Vampire Kallikantzaros sleeps, wasn’t it? At first, I thought it was a clever act to keep Wildefrau from escaping, but that wasn’t it.”

Sibyl could feel the great tension in her face.

And this was a change she had never experienced in her long years as nothing more than the master of the enchanting woods.

She was enjoying this.

…In truth, Sibyl had no way of confirming that everything the Sage had told her was true. And even if the Sage had explained the theory she supposedly used to break the barrier of time, Sibyl had no way of objectively proving it would work. But whether the Sage was telling the truth or not, the fact remained that her words upon their first meeting had reached the core of Sibyl’s heart. So the Royal Elf had trusted the stranger and decided she was worth walking alongside.

The Sage had said, “Past, present, or future, you really don’t change, do you? Seeing your face is somehow nostalgic.”

That had led Sibyl to a realization.

In the past, present, or future, she would only do as people said and behave as a Royal Elf. No one wanted her to take a single step outside of the pre-established harmony, they did not even tell her that was a possibility, she was left to not even question being treated like a stone or tree, and she would simply continue to inhale and exhale just like today be it 1000 or even 10,000 years from

then.

Ultimately, she was playing with fire.

A Royal Elf with noble blood in her veins was playing with fire just a little.

She was taking just a small step outside of the pre-established harmony. Even if that meant something definitive was derailed, she would take it. She would accept it. She would savor it. She could feel her chest filling with a sense of achievement after, for the first time in her life, accomplishing something on her own without anyone else asking it of her.

So.

That was why.

“This is no joke, Sibyl. Where does that look of accomplishment come from?”

Armelina’s voice stopped the tension in her cheek that was trying to form a smile.

Her face froze over.

There was no time, so they could not hold a full conversation. But the passage of time seemed to have slowed and the look in her eyes said it all.

Had she successfully gathered all the Hate on herself and allowed the Sage to escape safely? Was she satisfied with this one-way ticket of a plan given to her by the Sage? Was this really the best thing for the Sage? No, it was not. No matter how much she thought this was for her ally, it was all wasted effort.

Even White Witch Filinion could tell.

“You should have stopped her no matter what it took back when you saw her wandering and lost! If yours was the only hand from either world that could reach her, then you needed to pull her back onto the proper path!!”

If…

If she had truly been acting out of concern for her…

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau also spoke.

“Pushing people forward is not the only form of kindness. You should have stopped the Sage. Isn’t that when you should have given a truly unrestrained smile!?”

“Why…?”

Sibyl ignored her situation here and forced her mouth open as if to even reject the way time seemed to stretch out forever.

“Why do you have to say all this…!?”

Filinion, Armelina, and even Wildefrau all had the same look in their eyes.

The light seen there spoke clearly: We too have entrusted ourselves to that red Holy Swordswoman, so we can tell we had to say this.

“Ah.”

That was the limit.

The conditions were the same, but there was a fundamental difference between the girls who had remained by her side to the end and the one who had let go partway through.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

As soon as she found she had no rebuttal, the flow of time sped back up. Something terribly sharp and bright shot right by her cheek and broke through what stood directly behind her.

Part 14

A low vibration rattled in the ceiling.

The Sage looked up while facing Boo Boo in the windowless room, slowly sighed, and then silently stood from the box she was sitting on.

At some point, her strange waitress uniform had changed to the red armor and white miniskirt combo of a Holy Swordswoman. Her hair was straight once more as well.

“…So Sibyl was defeated.”

“B-boo?”

Boo Boo timidly spoke up, but the Sage only held her gauntleted hand to her mouth and giggled.

“Don’t worry, Boo Boo. I’m not mad.”

“?”

“In fact, it helps that Sibyl was defeated at this stage. It is a shame I wasn’t able to find a better way for Disaster to step down, though. This is not the final train. I had honestly wanted to have her naturally step down before she got caught up in the real trouble.”

The way the Sage smiled as she spoke reminded Boo Boo of a distant memory.

He realized this was just like that time.

She had that strange expression that looked sad even with a smile.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Solve this in a different way than you.”

“Wait!! Where are going!?”

“Whether or not you know, the end point is the same. So we will meet again. Once you reach the true Ground’s Nir.”

Boo Boo got up from the cart and tried to grab the Sage. He could not tell if she was a good person or not, but he could not let her leave. That impatience urged him to action.

But the very next moment, the Sage had already vanished from before his eyes.

Then he felt a heavy impact to the back of his head.

Part 15

They did not know the detailed conditions that Royal Elf Sibyl needed to materialize residual thoughts with her Skill, but since she had been staying so close to that door, its effective range could not be far.

“Boo Boo!!”

After running from the empty building that had been decorated by

the residual thoughts and then looking around, Beatrice spotted an almost identical building across the narrow back alley and facing the next road over. The inn town humans had said the Iberian Orc was taken to the back of the bar, but that position would have allowed him to be brought into either of the buildings. Once Beatrice set foot inside, that familiar bestial odor reached her nose. She followed her sense of smell and threw open the door.

She found a windowless room.

Boo Boo was facing the wall.

And there was a slight burnt smell mixed in.

“Boo Boo…?”

“When I woke up, the Sage was gone.”

He did not turn back toward her and his giant hands were working at something. He was facing what looked like the burned remains of parchment. That was likely all that remained of the documents the Sage had burned before leaving. Boo Boo was gathering them together, pasting them to the wall, and using pins and string to connect anything even slightly related.

“She was smiling, but she looked sad. I remember that look well. She had the same look when she spoke with me on the day the village was lost.”

That may have been why he seemed so clearly impatient despite usually being so carefree in a self-sufficient life not ruled by a calendar or clock.

“I can’t ignore that,” he said without turning around. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but it can’t be good. She said she did this to intentionally get her companion to lose to you and step down. That way she wouldn’t get involved in the rest of this. If that’s true, I

don’t think the Sage fears her own death. And that isn’t a good thing!”

Impatient Boo Boo obeyed his instincts to line up the scraps of parchment on the wall and link related items together with string. But he did not know much about human circumstances or Magic, so he seemed to lack the ability to translate a general sense of unease into words. He agonized over the puzzle he had put together.

Beatrice peered over at it herself.

She looked from string to string and scrap to scrap. This was the same information management technique she used with her fire illusion Magic. And by looking through each entry, her thoughts aligned with Boo Boo’s.

The girl with human knowledge finally spoke.

“…The deepest part of the Labyrinth…the Ground’s Nir monster… Boo Boo’s village…a method the Iberian Orcs did not use…the strongest individual rather than group…the limits of a life form… support from a tool…in other words, the strongest weapon…a Break News…?”

“Boo, hold on. Did you just say a Break News? The Sage is already ridiculously strong, but now she’s trying to use a paradox with a soul!?”

“This is bad,” muttered Beatrice.

The girl with red and silver hair grew pale and turned toward her reliable friend.

“Lorelei is an inorganic Break News that takes the form of a sword. When it is pulled from the stone, it materializes the greatest strength its wielder can imagine, but then it points out the flaws in

that theory, tears it apart, and guides its wielder to ruin. But it looks like she completed a complicated book on how to get Lorelei to fully submit to her…”

Lorelei.

The desperate Elkiad leader had once reached for that exceptional Break News in a last-ditch attempt. Beatrice and the others were only alive today because of the hole in that man’s theory of the strongest. But what if someone had the ultimate theory that filled in all of the holes? What if that delusion were materialized? That would lead only to absolute death.

Perhaps this was not so much an effective thesis on the strongest power and more like a grimoire used to summon and safely use a powerful demon.

And whatever it was, what would happen if the missing Sage really did reach for Lorelei? Would they all live happily ever after if she defeated the Ground’s Nir monster she kept talking about? That did not sit well with Beatrice. It made her uneasy, like some twisted irony hidden inside a storybook.

“Squeal, wait a second, Beatrice. Does that mean…?”

“Yes. We still don’t know how formidable a foe this Ground’s Nir thing is, but if that sage is taking this so seriously, then she might just gain the power to defeat that monster if she gains full control of Lorelei.”

Beatrice desperately steadied her dizzy head and leaned against Boo Boo.

And she said more.

“But that might also mean remaking the Sage into an even greater monster. And that won’t accomplish anything. It will only mean this

island is being threatened by a monster with even more power!!”

Between the Lines 1

I can’t believe this.

That wasn’t what I was trying to do.

Yes, yes. I’ll admit it. That started as a bit of mischief from me. I carved “Iberian!” into the Shining Weapon you had picked up and started using. But…but that wasn’t what I meant. I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! Iberian does refer to top quality, but, um, it’s kind of a cruel and dark joke. I’m sorry!!

Eh? It’s already caught on around the village?

It’s already been added to the cave paintings, so it…can’t be… changed???

Wait, wait, wait! This is kind of a big deal. Elder! If you tell them, you can get them to stop, right!? I mean, you’re the one guy in the world who defeated me with a single blunt weapon and got me to call you “master”, so you need to preserve your dignity!!

Yes, yeah, I’m sorry.

I know that was only an angry outburst.

So apologizing won’t change anything? It’s too late?

…Wowww.

I see. Then I won’t stop any of you, but keep in mind that it’s a

really dark joke, okay? This is going to be even more bad karma I have to carry with me. But if you don't mind, then I won't stop you. Although I guess all I can do is take responsibility as your namer.

Yes, yes.

That's right. Then let's keep things the way they are.

Right, Iberian Orc elder?

Chapter 2: Boss_Quest 02 "Double_Standard" Grade: ☆☆☆☆☆

Part 1

Now, things were not going well.

While they had overcome a major battle with Royal Elf Sibyl who had played a variety of cards supplied by her residual memory materialization and they had safely retrieved Boo Boo, they did not have time to return to Earth for a short break. They did not know where the Sage was and she had apparently wanted to let Sibyl lose so the Elf could safely step down before she began something that sounded truly ominous.

Something was definitely going to happen.

And if they could believe the information estimated from the burned remains of documents that Boo Boo had pasted to the wall, the Sage planned to become an “even greater monster” than Ground’s Nir by fully controlling Lorelei which gave its wielder power in exchange for assured ruin.

They did not have a moment to spare.

If the goal was to protect everyone living on the island from a monster, it was pointless to let an “even greater monster” rampage around. No matter which side won, everything would be annihilated in the end. It was like suggesting to fire a nuclear missile because your opponent had one. That was not a fight to protect.

Defeated Sibyl was left with Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra while Beatrice, Armelina, Filinion, Wildefrau, and Boo Boo left the inn town. It would have caused a commotion to have Boo Boo walk freely around the human town, so as much as they hated doing so, they tied him to the cart once more and carried him out that way.

“So…” White Witch Filinion sighed as they removed the ropes from the cart at the base of a mountain away from the human settlement. “You’re saying this secret method to fully control Lorelei is hidden at the former site of Boo Boo’s village?”

“I don’t really get it either, but that’s what the Sage’s notes said,” said Boo Boo.

“That means the Sage at least believed it was there.”

Boo Boo got up from the cart and set his feet on the dark soil ground.

“We don’t know where Lorelei is now, so we can’t lie in wait there. That means the village is our only hint. I’d rather not go there since it will probably make me sad, but we have no choice. If we don’t pursue and stop the Sage soon, something bad is sure to happen.”

“Wheeze. I understand how you feel. I really do. But…”

Filinion sounded like she was melting away.

Beatrice and Armelina both had a very bad feeling about this.

“We just fought so hard against Sibyl and now we have to fight another group battle? We haven’t returned to Earth or spent a night at an inn! I’m all out of the Willpower needed for Magic!!”

“Hold it, cow!! It was the 3 of us who did all the work! You didn’t do squat in the healer role!”

“Who do you think it was that healed your tooth, you imbecile!? And

the healer isn't supposed to stand in the line of fire! You may not have noticed, but I did a whole bunch of healing! Without me, you definitely would've died 5…no, 10 times over!!"

"By the way, my body feels pretty sluggish, but that isn't your fault, is it? I seem to recall hearing you say the reconstructive healing potion for my tooth was a special case in how mentally taxing it is in exchange for neatly healing facial injuries."

"…Huh?"

"Cow, were you just throwing any old recovery potion at us!? That would explain why I'm all out of Willpower! That's like giving me general anesthesia and performing major surgery just because I tripped and scraped my knee, isn't it!?"

"Anyway, the Sage is already on the way to the former Iberian Orc village and we can't afford to let her get away!!"

Beatrice and Armelina lectured her, but fully melted Filinion only childishly pouted her lips (despite being in college) and refused to listen.

Then someone else's comment only exacerbated the turmoil.

It came from Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau.

"Now, I have never directly dealt with her, but the Sage is quite skilled, correct? Perhaps even more so than Sibyl? If we're completely out of Willpower and can't use any Magic when we do run across her, won't we just be wasting that fateful encounter?"

"Ah, you idiot!!"

"Right? Right!? Not even Date Masamune or Takeda Shingen fought all the time without any sleep or rest. Getting your rest so you can fight at top performance is the key to victory, isn't it? Yes, yes!!"

“That glasses cow is only complaining and buying time because she wants to take a break, so don’t encourage her! Ahh, she always latches right onto anyone who’s willing to listen to her…”

In the real world, this would have been a college girl clinging to a middle school girl’s leg, so it was an odd visual. But the Ice Waterfall Princess looked like the dominatrix type, so combining her with the slow glasses cow who had become a large golden dog was even more…something. Beatrice had trouble deciding if it was a match made in heaven or a dangerous mixture.

“(How about we have Wildefrau take responsibility for the glasses cow from now on?)”

“(That’s an excellent idea. It sounds like a nice hazing for our newcomer.)”

“You two! You’re trying to shove some kind of awful job onto me, aren’t you!?”

That said, Beatrice was also doubtful that they could defeat the Sage at the best of times. And it was true that their Willpower had been dragged down from middle midlevel to lower midlevel, so they could probably manage a normal Labyrinth crawl but might not have enough for hunting a major target. She had no intention whatsoever of supporting Filinion’s desire to take it easy, but they did need some way to recover their Willpower even a little.

“How about we take a nap as a compromise?” suggested Wildefrau in a somewhat flat voice with her hands on her hips. She seemed to have grown sick of having the cow clinging to her long leg. “Spending the night in an inn would of course be best, but that isn’t an option. So we can instead dedicate a short period of time – an hour or two perhaps – to get some deep sleep. Sleep is meant to recover our Willpower, so as long as we accomplish that, the length of time is immaterial.”

It made sense.

(Childish) Beatrice, Armelina, and Filinion flinched at having the (middle school girl) newcomer show them up like that, but when they thought about it, Wildefrau had worked her way up to the level cap just like them. She was no different from them when it came to work-related matters.

“Boo? So what are you going to do?”

“Well, if we just designate a period of time and say we’re going to sleep, I think I would just toss and turn.”

“Glasses cow, I bet you would sleep like a baby if you ran around to work off enough fat that those 2 giant things shrank by a few centimeters. In fact, you just don’t get enough exercise in general.”

“Or maybe the rest of us could sleep like babies if we grabbed the glasses cow’s 2 giant things and give them a twist. Okay, let’s test that theory.”

“I’m sensing some hatred for these breasts even though I didn’t ask for them to get this big… But I’m going to hide behind Wildefrau! Look at this incredible volume! This is how strong people can grow!!”

“Wait! This is too much for me to handle…!!”

Wildefrau began panicking once she was caught in the Boobs Substitution ninja technique, but the look in Beatrice and Armelina’s eyes was a cold one.

“Unfortunately, we’re not all that interested in Wildefrau.”

“Eh? Eh? Does that mean you’ve accepted me as a good person…?”

“I mean, Wildefrau only created those bodylines by adjusting her

equipment. In reality, she's a middle school girl. More accurately, she's a jakigan-style kokeshi doll with a fairly undeveloped B-cu-…"

"Abyahabrbrpeh!? You…you aren't supposed to mention that while we're in Ground's Nir, officer!!"

"The funny part is that she actually has a bigger cup size than a certain flaaat person I could mention."

"That isn't funny at all!! Get your butt over here, Beatrice!!"

Armelina tearfully yelled at her, but if they kept this up, dawn would arrive before they got a wink of sleep. They needed to discuss how to most efficiently get some deep sleep, not spend the night on girls talk.

And at times like this, the most sensible pitch was generally thrown by Filinion the glasses cow who knew a wide range of trivia (although it was mostly useless in battle).

"Then wouldn't it be better to try out the method that's been spreading through the inn town?"

"?"

"It's all about sleepwear lately. Let's have a pajama party☆"

Part 2

"Kh…"

Royal Elf Sibyl awoke to a dull pain piercing the middle of her gut. Unlike in the pure and deep forest damp with night dew, she lay on a simple bed and a tallow lamp produced air that felt like having

butter shoved in her mouth. The sheet placed over her did not seem to use even silk thread, so each time she moved, she felt a pain on her skin like a hard brush scraping against her.

Where was she?

She worked her groggy head as she stared up at the low ceiling.

Her long ears then picked up on a secret conversation held in the poorly-lit room.

“U-um, do we really have to dress like this?”

“Of course. It would cause a scene if we said we had knocked out a waitress from a popular bar and wanted somewhere to interrogate her, so it was best to act like inn guests and rent a convenient room.”

“Gathering together in the inn town at night while wearing pajamas? That sounds naughty to me. I won’t let you lay a finger on Onee-sama!”

There was no point in pretending to be asleep, but Sibyl still kept her eyes only cracked open while observing what she could without moving her head.

Three girls stood at the bedside: a Summon Hunter with her long blonde braid tied in a large loop, an Alchemist Cheerleader with pink twintails, and a Noble Dancer with her blonde ponytail wrapped into a curl. It was obvious at a glance that they all had rare Jobs and had honed their skills to a frightening degree.

The one real problem was the fact that they had all removed their armor.

For some reason, they were all wearing pajamas in this inn at night.

The pink twintails girl moved her pompom-covered hands to line up

small bottles on the side table. They all contained grooming supplies such as milky lotion and mudpack that she seemed to have gone out of her way to make using Alchemy.

“But, you know, I only said to wear pajamas, so that choice is your own responsibility. Why are you wearing a baby doll in enemy territory?”

“I-I’m sorry. I just went with what I normally wear…sob…”

“No, it’s fine, young lady. In fact, I’m quite a fan of that! Yes!!”

…The girl with the mole under her eye began speaking faster and seemed to reveal her true nature(?) a bit, but before Sibyl could figure out what exactly that true nature was, the Noble Dancer kicked the nearly fully-exposed butt of the Alchemist Cheerleader whose bare legs were exposed below her white and pink mini-China pajamas.

“I won’t forgive you if you make Onee-sama cry! I already don’t agree with letting you all look after her, so don’t get carried away!!”

“Y-you are very different from the cute Rusalka-chan mentioned in the reports. Plus, I don’t recall summoning you here too and you have no authority over me.”

Incidentally, the Noble Dancer was wearing a tank top and bike shorts. That kind of flexible material was fairly rare in Ground’s Nir, so she was clearly paying attention to how she looked even if it looked rougher.

And this seemed to be the limit for Sibyl.

The others had of course noticed that their prey on the bed had opened her eyes a bit to observe her surroundings. And that meant she was able to talk.

There was a moonlit window near the bed.

Sibyl took a deep breath and prepared to hop up from the bed.

“Achoo.”

But just before she did, she heard a sneeze from the pink twintailed Alchemist Cheerleader whose bodylines were exposed by the slits running all the way up both sides of her pajamas. Worse, she heard a sinister metallic noise. She saw a trio of metal claws stick out from the pink pompoms. And they were not meant to simply do damage. They contained a Magic curse that had a chance of causing instant death. Multiple Icons were wrapped around Huldra’s wrists.

If Sibyl had sprung up like a clockwork toy, the tips would have stabbed into her throat.

The success rate for instant death could not be very high, but that girl could make a great variety of Items using Alchemy. She had likely increased the success rate using plenty of consumable Items.

The pink twintail girl only smiled as the metal claws retracted into the pompoms.

“Now, then. Since it seems you can move, you’ll be helping us☆”

“Tch.”

Sibyl could not help but click her tongue when Huldra winked and stuck out her tongue a bit. From the looks of things, Huldra would not lock blades in a head-on clash with an enemy she wished to slay. That mini-China girl was like a Gimmick disguised as a treasure chest. Let her appearance fool you, and you would be devoured.

Having lost her chance to sit up, Sibyl felt pinned to the bed as she asked a question.

“What are you trying to do?”

“That’s our question for you.” The pompom-wielding Alchemist Cheerleader used Magic to make stars appear in her eyes for no reason. “What were you trying to do by working with the Sage? I believe the chief and the others are attacking that question from a different angle.”

“Heh,” laughed Sibyl. “I am the last of the Royal Elves, rulers of the noble forest. Did you think some simple savagery would be enough move my tongue? …Or that’s what I would like to say, but since I lost, I can only assume the Sage herself set that up as the optimal outcome. It pisses me off, but I will follow her plan. That should be best for her in the end.”

“…I hate how arrogant this princess is.”

Sibyl did not let Rusalka’s comment get to her. And there was no need for her to remain lying down. She slowly sat up from the hard bed. She had already been irritated by the unpleasant light and smell from the tallow lamp overhead, so she got up on her knees to distance herself from it as much as possible.

“If you wish for respect, you must first wear the bare minimum of clothing and follow proper etiquette, human. You claimed it was necessary for camouflage, but it saddens me that such a strange outfit even qualifies as camouflage…”

Then the rough sheet fell away from her chest.

She was naked save for some bandages.

Time ground to a halt.

After being knocked unconscious in the battle, she had been taken to a nearby inn for treatment. She should have considered this possibility, but seeing it for herself was something else entirely.

The body illuminated by the flickering light of the impolite tallow lamp was lacking in curves, but it also contained flowing bodylines that attracted the eye of any who saw it. Rather than protect her sensitive skin, the bandages wrapped around the important bits provided the sinister seduction of a certain kind of dancer.

Then Rusalka gave a wicked grin.

“The bare minimum of clothing, hm? Poo hoo hoo… That really is the bare minimum…”

Immediately afterwards, the princess grew red to the very tips of her long ears, she uttered an unintelligible scream, and a fairly large pillow flew through the air.

Part 3

They had to recover their Willpower as quickly as possible so they could use Magic.

They could not afford any delay, so they chose Boo Boo’s brick house as their rest area. Beatrice and the others needed to get some pajamas, so they stopped by the inn town treasury to withdraw some personal items before regrouping at Boo Boo’s place.

After exchanging a glance, a complicated look came over Beatrice and Armelina.

“What’s this? So all of us already had pajamas prepared?”

“I never had a chance to try them out. If I wore costume pajamas deep in the dark Labyrinth, someone might mistake me for a Gimmick and attack.”

“Um, costume…?”

“Cough, cough!! Oh, dammit, I guess you’re finding out later regardless! Look forward to it, Wildefrau!!”

The four of them intruded on Boo Boo’s house and then held out their Shining Weapons.

“Set the time for an hour from now.”

“Ehh? Can’t we take 2 hours?”

“1 hour!”

“Then let’s go with 3 as a compromise!!”

“That’s even more and we don’t have time for regurgitating clichéd gags, Filinion!!”

“Sigh. Then can’t we go with an hour and a half?”

The newcomer sounded exasperated and rubbed her index finger against her temple, so the other 3 girls quickly shut up. This was strange. She was supposed to be the insane queen who laughed loudly while taking a liquid nitrogen bath in the snowy mountains, so how had she taken up the position of the sensible one?

At any rate…

“Okay, all our timers are set. If we relied on just one of them, that

person might deactivate it. We would feel like idiots if we all fell asleep and woke up to find the sun rising."

The timer was already running, so they had to cut out any pointless chatting. They had Boo Boo leave the house and then changed into their pajamas.

"Ha ha. The cow looks like a mafia don."

"I'm only wearing a gown! And I chose it because it feels a lot like the juban I'm used to!!"

"Oh, so that's what you meant by costume pajamas."

"Laugh if you must, dammit! But I'm never leaving this bear!!"

And…

"…By the way, what do you think you're doing, Wildefrau?"

"?"

"Don't just tilt your head! I'm asking why you're sprinkling flower petals over your naked body!!"

"You have to ask? What can I say other than this is how I relax? Hm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm."

"And now you're making a ridiculously simple shower using water Magic!? You'll get everything damp, so do that outside!!"

It was Armelina's turn to be the sensible one, but her shouts fell on deaf ears as Wildefrau put her hands behind her head and stuck her massive chest out to catch the hot water on her entire body. She had clearly entered her own world.

They could understand why she would want to wash away her sweat before going to sleep, but why would she do so in the very

room she planned to sleep in?

“It’s no use, Armelina. Ask a pervert to be normal and you’ll only get perversion out of them. Nudists speak the nudist language. It won’t even look like they’re speaking the same language as the rest of us.”

An odd noise resembling a sneeze came from a beam near the brick house’s ceiling.

“Hm? Hmmm? Yawn. Is someone talking about me…?”

“Meridiana, how many times do I have to tell you you’ll catch cold if sleep in such an indecent state of undress? Zzz…”

Beatrice shook her head with a meek look on her face and finished her thought.

“…You really should have picked up on this from the moment she goes around wearing nothing but a sword.”

But the other 3 sent icy looks her way.

“By the way…”

“U-um, Beatrice? About that thing you’re changing into like it’s normal…”

“What…no, it couldn’t be… Is that the legend that was said to have already gone extinct at my school?”

Beatrice looked like she had no idea what they were talking about.

For some reason, she had changed into red bloomers and a short-sleeve shirt.

“What? They’re just pajamas. I saw them for sale at the inn town and thought they were perfect.”

“What do they teach you at the Detached Magic Palace!? Are you insane!? There’s also something wrong with whatever shop went to the trouble of recreating them so perfectly in Ground’s Nir!!”

“No, no. Iroka learned her lesson and told me they aren’t actually cutting-edge sportswear. That’s why we decided to overcome that hardship together by studying up on their proper usage.”

“Y-you were right. Ask a pervert to be normal and you really will only get perversion out of them. It’s like a universal law or something.”

“Try saying that again once you’ve put on at least one article of clothing, nudist.”

Anyway, Boo Boo’s house had no bed. Most likely, the Fairies had been unable to make on that could support his weight. There was a blanket set stuffed with Ghost Down folded up in a corner, so they laid that out and lay down on it.

It was quite large since it was made for Boo Boo’s size, but it still had to hold 4 girls. Plus, one of them was nude and another was in bloomers. It was a post-apocalyptic sort of chaos.

“Sniff, sniff. Mh, this blanket doesn’t smell much like Boo Boo. Is he still just lying on the floor?”

“I’ll light an aroma candle regardless. Hm, hmm, hmm. This is the time for a White Witch Mixing expert’s Candy Rose☆”

“Hey, those have to be adjusted for each person, so it might put you to sleep, but it’ll keep us awake.”

“Yawwwn… I don’t mind,” said Wildefrau. “One of my strengths is my ability to sleep soundly anywhere as long as I have my usual night cap.”

“You can sleep in the nude anywhere? Ha ha ha.”

“Beatrice, you don’t have a leg to stand on in those bloomers of yours.”

Armelina acted like the one speaking down to them from a stage of sensibility, but the others had of course noticed what was going on there.

“Hey, Armelina?”

“What?”

“…Why do you have a pillow in addition to your pajamas? And not just one, but a lemon normal pillow and a banana body pillow?”

“G-gulp!!”

That was naturally because she had enough personal items to have buried a secret treasure chest behind Boo Boo’s house, but they could not find out about that.

“And the rest of us were going without because the giant Boo Boo-sized pillow would hurt our necks! In fact, if you’ve got 2, then you can hand one of them over, can’t you!?”

“You’re not making any sense! When did you become a socialist, Filinion!?”

“Oh, shut up, you! Everyone, let’s submit this flaaat girl to some tickle torture and steal those pillows!!”

“Well, if that’s your idea of recreation…”

This led to the outrageous scene of 4 girls wriggling around underneath a giant blanket, but…

“Hyahn!?”

“…Um, Armelina?”

“Cough! Cough, cough!! It’s nothing! I’m doing just fine!!”

As Armelina blushed and choked, Beatrice successfully swiped the wonderfully manly body pillow.

The Holy Swordswoman in bloomers lay on her side, used both her arms and legs to cling to the giant curved banana, and muttered to herself.

“Sigh. I need to get Boo Boo to wear pajamas sometime…”

“That sounds like a good idea, but I’m a little afraid you’re going to try to get him to wear bloomers.”

Despite all that, they had only just finished rescuing Boo Boo and defeating Sibyl, which had brought extreme tension and exhaustion. More than the pajamas or aroma candle, the greatest spice may have been freeing themselves from their weariness.

Part 4

And precisely an hour and a half later…

“Everyone, lend me a hand! We need to restrain this indolent glasses cow! She secretly got up and tried to cancel the timers on all of our Shining Weapons!!”

“Oww, ow, ow, owww.”

“The scary part is that you think that might actually trick us into thinking you’re half asleep. Is your head actually empty and the glasses are your true form? Are you a pair of glasses that turned into a cow that only eats and sleeps!?”

“And doesn’t this mean her own plotting did her in? She’ll be the only one of us that didn’t get any sleep,” pointed out Wildefrau. “And isn’t the healer a crucial part of a Party?”

Filinion had proved herself to be an insidious sort of cow, but no amount of rubbing her eyes and wobbling her head would stop time for her. The girls had recovered some of the Willpower needed to use Magic, so they folded up the blanket set, returned it to a corner of the room, and removed their pajamas before equipping themselves in their combat style which included armor and miniskirts.

Boo Boo had not once set foot in the house.

They could hear a shrill voice from the garden out front. That would be Ileana, the sexy brown woman who stood at the peak of the Mandragoras, who was being watered. That meant Boo Boo had to be awake too.

“Boo, is it time to get going?”

“Yes, it is. Nnn…”

Beatrice nodded while stretching to drive out her remaining sleepiness.

She had to focus on what was to come.

Beatrice, Filinion, Armelina, Boo Boo, and Wildefrau seemed like quite a group, but they were up against the Sage who had every Element fully covered. They already had no idea how to defeat her, but she was also trying to obtain even more extraordinary power by fully controlling Lorelei of the Break News.

If what the Sage had once told Beatrice was accurate, she felt some guilt about destroying the Iberian Orc village. But despite that emotion, she had kept working by sealing the digitized souls in the Shining Weapon and gathering corpses to create Disaster.

No matter what it took, she would slay Ground's Nir, the monster lurking in the depths of the Labyrinth. That was a noble goal, but "no matter what it took" had a frighteningly wide range when it came to her. They did not know what kind of conclusion she envisioned, but since she was convinced all life on the island would be wiped out, it was entirely possible she would deem saving a single life a victory on her part. That would sound contradictory coming from anyone else, but the Sage was known to take things to that kind of extreme.

"We need to visit the site of the Iberian Orc village. We focused on recovering Willpower, so the Sage will likely have gotten ahead of us to an extent. We need to make sure we make up for that by the end. Boo Boo, can you lead us to where the village was?"

"Yes."

Beatrice had known Boo Boo since he was little, but she did not know where his village had been located. In that sense, the Sage's whims had helped them out quite a bit. If she had disappeared with Boo Boo while Beatrice's group was dealing with the residual memory bar prepared by Sibyl, they would have had no hints remaining to track her down.

At this point, they doubted the Sage had been looking down on or underestimating them.

After all, she had apparently ordered Disaster and Sibyl against them while at least somewhat hoping those two would lose and drop out of the fight.

The Sage would not interfere with Boo Boo's actions or with the actions of those who traveled with him.

She seemed to have made a major change in policy from when she had remained hidden in the underside of the world, but that likely meant she did not have time to bother with that anymore. The monster was closer to completion than she had anticipated, so she wanted to increase everyone's odds of survival by attacking it from multiple angles. That was what she had told Boo Boo, but it could be summed up as follows:

I might not succeed.

So it's a relief to know there's some insurance in case I fail.

She might be unable to defeat the monster even with Lorelei.

She might fail to control Lorelei and go on a rampage.

She might defeat the monster with Lorelei but become some kind of imaginable calamity afterwards.

In the end, she did not have all the answers despite talking like she did. She had only blindly made it this far.

"…How selfish."

"?"

Boo Boo tilted his head at Beatrice's muttered comment.

Boo Boo veered to the side into some underbrush in the forest a short distance from the usual entrance to the Labyrinth. No, that was not it. It was hard to tell in the dark forest at night, but when he

parted the underbrush, he revealed a narrow animal trail.

“If we follow this, we’ll reach your village, won’t we? Fwehhh. I feel like I’d get lost on my own…”

Filinion’s cheerful tone belied her words, so she may have been relieved to have some kind of path to follow. But Beatrice’s expression grew tense.

“I don’t know the exact date, but it has to have been quite a while. Boo Boo, have you visited the village since then?”

“No. Squeal. Because seeing it makes me sad.”

Wildefrau frowned at that.

“But wait a minute. Then, um…who has been walking this animal trail to keep the underbrush down?”

“If it wasn’t Boo Boo, then there’s only one other option.”

Armelina’s tone was low and she had likely reached the answer already: the Sage.

That woman had attacked the Iberian Orc village herself, so she would remember where it was. Since the animal trail did not seem to have been created recently, she may have been visiting to investigate something from time to time.

Was she there yet or not?

The answer to that question would determine their strategy, but they had to prepare themselves for the worst. Their odds of survival were greater if they assumed they were arriving late.

The Sage sought a method to perfectly control Lorelei, the demonic blade that destroyed its wielder by too easily giving them ultimate power.

(But what connection is there between the Iberian Orcs and Lorelei? If their entire species was focused on the monster, I doubt they would have sealed it away.)

They had a lot of questions, but catching up to the Sage came first.

Beatrice was worried about what catching up would mean. Part of her feared she was inviting people she cared about toward a precipice leading down to hell, but they had to do this regardless. Sitting still to not anger the Sage was no longer an option. All life on Ground's Nir and the Magic and Pieces that supported the world order back on Earth were hanging in the balance. There was no longer a safe zone in either world.

And as she thought about that, Boo Boo came to a stop.

The underbrush and trees thinned out.

There was a large clearing up ahead.

"This is the place," he said without looking back at the others.

He may have been afraid to set foot somewhere that would remind him so strongly of his friends' and family's deaths. Beatrice recalled how often he had said he was afraid of ghosts.

Beatrice took a step forward to stand by his side and then gently held his hand.

"Let's go, Boo Boo."

"Right. I won't let a tragedy like that happen to anyone else ever again."

They then stepped into that forbidden land.

Originally, the forest's trees would have been cut down to create the clearing, but the passage of time had allowed green underbrush

to cover the dark soil. But it was much shorter than on the animal trail and someone might have thought it was the perfect spot for a picnic if they were ignorant of the horrific tragedy that had occurred there.

What looked like a few small mossy hills remained. They resembled the leaf house that Boo Boo had made, but with their owners gone, other plants had grown on top of them.

“But, huh? Isn’t this kind of weird?” White Witch Filinion sounded frantic and began fidgeting with her glasses. “A ghost town would rot away with time, but doesn’t this look oddly organized?”

It was true some of the houses remained, but most of them had collapsed. And instead of piles of rubble, the building materials seemed divided into systematic piles. The wooden pillars were with the other wooden pillars and the leaf roofs were with the other leaf roofs.

A thought came to Beatrice.

She called up her frames and lines using fire illusion Magic and moved her fingers along to fill them with what they knew.

“Maybe it was for Sibyl.”

“What do you mean?” asked Boo Boo.

“I guess you wouldn’t understand since you didn’t see her yourself. The Sage’s aide was a Royal Elf with a Skill that allowed her to materialize residual thoughts.”

“I heard about that a long time ago. The Royal Elves were praised by everyone because they had the power to lead people astray in the forest. Boo, their enchanted forest is really mysterious!”

Beatrice belatedly realized that may have been one side to it. That may indeed have been the greatest Skill for a people who wanted

to protect their lives in the forest.

“And the Sage seems to think the gathered strength of the Iberian Orcs is the best way of fighting the monster. The souls in your Shining Weapon and Disaster were both byproducts of that research. Then what about Sibyl? If she could summon a large group of Iberian Orcs using the items left in the village, wouldn’t that give the Sage the fighting force she wants?”

Beatrice felt like she had found the four corner pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

She still had a lot of work to fill in the entire picture, but she had a solid starting point.

“But in the end…”

“Yes. If that had actually worked, the Sage wouldn’t have let Sibyl go. Or maybe Sibyl showed no sign of success at the final stage, so the Sage switched over to Lorelei.”

She severed the line between the Sage and Sibyl and connected the former to a Break News instead.

If the method of fully controlling Lorelei was hidden in the Iberian Orc village, then it felt all the more like the Sage’s plans were all tied to the Iberian Orcs. Or maybe dragging around her past sin was how she intended to strengthen herself.

Armelina gave some quiet instructions without moving her lips.

“Either way, we’re standing on the same stage as the Sage. She could attack us at any time, so keep your guard up.”

Beatrice naturally stayed back to back with Boo Boo as they moved and Armelina did the same with Wildefrau. Filinion was left out, but she was not suited for battle and no one could relax with her watching their back. Having her follow one or the other of the pairs

was for the best.

They had no way of investigating the abandoned materials gathered for Sibyl's residual thoughts.

They instead checked the triangular silhouettes covered in green that still somewhat retained their original shape. They had been leaf houses instead of log cabins or brick buildings, so even if they collapsed, no one would be buried alive inside.

They did not seem at all lived in.

There was nothing of note left inside, the leaves on the floor had rotted away, and fast-growing weeds had filled the inside.

"…"

Boo Boo did not speak a word.

He was the only one who had lived here, so he was the only one who could know what feelings filled his chest. There was no need to force him to verbalize them and affix the label of a specific emotion onto them. It was best to leave them as pure, formless feelings that only he could understand.

How many more times would he have to feel like this before they caught up to the Sage?

As Beatrice wondered that, something changed.

"Boo?"

"What is it, Boo Boo?"

"Wait, Beatrice. Everyone else, too. I've never seen this building before."

Everyone stopped and turned toward Boo Boo.

He seemed unsure of what he was saying, so he brought a hand to his mouth and tilted his head.

“I thought the elder’s big house was here and no one was allowed inside without his permission.”

The leaf houses had no locks, so the Iberian Orcs had likely lived a communal lifestyle where they could freely visit each other and borrow things. If this one house was notable for needing permission to go inside, then it gave of a sense of authority. Before even bringing up hackers or jailors and prisoners, the ability to protect one’s secrets and divulge others’ secrets was the peak of a certain hierarchy.

“But now there’s this small house here. Squeal… The elder’s house wasn’t this small. Even if I was smaller back then, I wouldn’t mistake something this small for being so big.”

Based on the moss covering it, this building had not been constructed after the fact.

Wildefrau thoughtfully placed her index finger on her slender chin.

“Would the elder’s house have also had a triangular tent structure with a single space inside?”

“Y-yes. Most likely. What about it?”

“Then the elder’s extra-large house would have had an extra-large space inside, so couldn’t it have contained an entire normal house inside it?”

“Ah, are you saying there was another, smaller house inside the big one? Like nesting dolls or miniature household shrine!?”

In that case, this was the core of the secret the elder had protected by forbidding the villagers from entering his house. There had to be something there. It felt like they had taken a step closer to the Sage

who sought complete control over Lorelei.

Beatrice added a new frame with her fire illusion Magic.

They were approaching the truth.

“Let’s go. Can you do this, Boo Boo?”

“Yes. Don’t worry.”

Boo Boo remained stopped and stroked his tusk with his right hand just once. The others did not know the details, but that may have been a ritual before setting foot on holy ground. They did not know the custom, but they made sure to bow before continuing.

They were finally getting close to the core of the issue.

It looked a lot like the other collapsed houses, but it was somehow different.

It was possible there was a secret grimoire inside, that the Sage was grabbing it right this instant, and that she would stab them with a blade or Magic as soon as they pushed open the leaf entrance.

Beatrice and Armelina naturally held their Shining Weapons more tightly.

This might be the end.

They might be pulling the trigger of ruin.

Beatrice gulped and whispered something.

“…I’m opening it.”

Did the leaves contain a powerful disinfectant, or were they just thick? The leaf entrance had maintained its original form without rotting away. Beatrice grabbed it and Boo Boo did so too. They both nodded and then opened it together.

They sensed an odd smell.

And they had been right to be on their guard. If they had carelessly stepped inside, they really might have lost their lives.

It was a rusty smell.

And the entire floor space of the leaf house was filled by a square hole.

Beatrice pitched forward as she came to a quick stop. The darkness of night was part of it, but the hole was still strange. She could not see the bottom. At first, she wondered if it was a trap meant to punish those who entered holy ground or if it was used for some kind of depressing ritual, but then Filinion provided a different theory while pushing up her glasses.

“Hey, Beatrice. Be careful and look here. On the side of the square hole.”

“?”

The Holy Swordswoman looked puzzled, but she finally realized what Filinion was trying to say.

What was causing the rusty smell?

“What is this? They look like metal rails.”

They ran vertically down the wall. And instead of normal train rails, they were jagged. Instead of having pieces missing or broken off, it was clearly made that way on purpose. It almost looked like the teeth for round gears to fit into.

And there were rails set up on all 4 walls. They could not say how long the rails were because they vanished into the seemingly bottomless pit.

“Which means…”

“This isn’t a pitfall.”

Armelina and Wildefrau exchanged a glance.

Beatrice sighed and placed her hands on her hips.

“They may be for an elevator or lift. And if the elevator itself isn’t here…”

“Ah, wait! Beatrice!?”

Filinion cried out because Beatrice kneeled down and stuck her head into the hole. If she lost her balance, she would fall right down.

“Someone hold onto my hips.”

“U-um, I’ll do it, but…”

“Someone other than Filinion! She’s actually volunteering for once, but I don’t trust her arm strength!!”

Boo Boo’s large hand wrapped around her hips and she leaned even further down. She was nearly flipped entirely upside down and she pressed her ear against one jagged metal rail on the wall.

She waited in silence for a few seconds.

After confirming something for herself, she muttered a comment.

“There’s an odd vibration. This elevator is descending even now. And there’s only one person that could be riding it: the Sage!!”

Part 5

Let’s have a pajama party☆

“Pant!! Pant…!!!!!!”

In a room at an inn town inn, a Royal Elf with 100% of her face blushing red had wrapped her entire body in a cheap sheet, turning herself into a living summer roll. She then rolled off of the bed and sat trembling in a corner of the small room.

Finding herself naked save for some bandages seemed to have upset her.

She was a summer roll instead of a spring roll because the sheet was incredibly thin and her silhouette showed through. Even if she was somewhat lacking in curves, the feminine curves she did have showed boldly through. Combined with the shadow created by the tallow lamp, it looked like she was being crassly tormented by human civilization.

The first to speak was Huldra, the Alchemist Cheerleader in mini-China pajamas that left her legs bare.

“Now. Then. Since you’ve woken up, how about we have a chat? I’d like to hear about your relationship with the Sage.”

“F-fine, then. …But only if you give me another sheet. My heart can’t bear this see-through thing.”

Rusalka, the Noble Dancer in a tank top and bike shorts, tossed her a spare sheet and Gruagach, the Summon Hunter wearing an adult baby doll, fidgeted her inner thighs. Seeing Sibyl’s reaction may have reminded her how embarrassing her own (80%+ transparency) see-through outfit was.

Huldra dragged over a chair with a back and sat in it backwards. She spread her legs wide like someone who had failed to clear a vaulting box and she rested her arms and slender chin on the back.

Without the chair back, her mini-China would have been woefully insufficient to hide everything.

After letting go of her pompoms, she patted her own face with her hands and rubbed the mole below her eye with a finger.

“Feel free to talk once you’re ready.”

“Are you removing your makeup to lower your Hate value? I’m willing to explain without being lured into ‘carelessly’ letting something slip.”

After increasing her defense power with the double sheets, Sibyl finally took a deep breath.

“I will tell you what I know, but I haven’t been following the Sage from the very beginning. As a Royal Elf, I have an extremely long life. Since my appearance remains the same in the past, present, and future, the Sage may have found me easy to approach as she jumps between those time periods.”

Time periods.

Huldra and the others had heard talk of that from Armelina.

And they had also been told not to just accept it as fact.

“First of all, what was the starting point for the Sage? Was it simply a Gate accident, or did she intentionally travel between time periods with some objective in mind?”

“I have no way of proving any of this. But if what she said is true, you could call it an accident and you could also call it intentional.”

Living Spring Roll Sibyl gave a cynical smile in the corner of the room.

“It would seem that something greater than you can imagine will

happen in the future.”

Part 6

A giant elevator in the elder’s house had been hidden from the rest of the Iberian Orc village.

But where did it lead?

Given what spread out below Ground’s Nir, the answer seemed self-evident.

“Y-you mean Boo Boo’s village had their own entrance to the Labyrinth when all of humankind had just the one?”

“Squeal. We had no interest in somewhere as scary as the Labyrinth. I don’t understand why the elder didn’t seal up something so dangerous.”

Boo Boo really did not seem to know what this was for.

But at the same time, the Sage had mentioned a duty and raison d'être for the Iberian Orcs that Boo Boo had been unaware of. They had carefully monitored the movements of the Labyrinth and worked together to stop the monster in its depths when it was nearing completion.

Was this the entrance they had used for that attack?

If so…

Could it be…?

“…I found something.”

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau spoke up while observing the crumbling leaf building. Instead of the outer wall, she was looking at the inner wall that was difficult to see with the hole filling the floor space.

That area was relatively un-decayed and she had apparently found some writing there.

It said the following:

Central Shaft

Island ← to the → Abyss

It was no more than the remains of a sign written on the wall, so it could only give them so much information. Even so, they thought about what it could mean.

It was a sign of great change to come.

Beatrice's mass of frames and lines was changing form like an amoeba.

"Island… Well, that must refer to the island of Ground's Nir."

"Which means the other end is the abyss… I assume we can just take that literally. So is this elevator a shortcut straight down to the bottom of the Labyrinth!?"

"The phrasing of 'Central Shaft' is extremely curious. I mean, if that's accurate, wouldn't it make the Labyrinth entrance we normally use a back entrance or side entrance!?"

"There's a bigger issue." Beatrice pointed out the most important aspect of this. "Why is there a sign written in the alphabet here? Remember when we were preparing for Boo Boo's birthday party? Didn't we have trouble with the culture of the Iberian Orc village because the only records were cave paintings written in some kind

of hieroglyphic symbols?”

“Ah.”

It hit them once she mentioned it.

But in that case…

“This wasn’t written by the Iberian Orc elder. This writing suggests that the elevator itself was made by a different species…by humans.”

They had never heard anything about that.

And there were more questions.

“Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon had ‘Iberian!’ carved into it in katakana. But that was given to him by the Sage after she destroyed the village.”

Naturally, the origin of the term “Iberian” would not be found anywhere on Ground’s Nir. It was clearly borrowed from a well-known variety of Spanish pork.

Meaning…

Had she been involved in the elder’s secret, the construction of the elevator, and the naming of the Iberian Orc species?

Had she not unilaterally slaughtered them while viewing them with nothing but bigotry and discrimination? Had she sent them to their graves only after building up a close relationship?

In truth, they had not entirely trusted what the Sage had told them. But now they had some objective evidence. They could no longer doubt her. Everything she had said was true, but that only made it worse. She had not protected out of love or killed out of hate. She had killed even though she loved them. She had killed because she

loved them. They could not leave Ground's Nir's direct fate and Earth's indirect fate in the hands of someone like that. Who could say how many lives would be lost in her attempt to save everyone?

Beatrice once more peered into the depths of the pit.

The pit itself had likely already existed. After all, the Sage had not existed before Ground's Nir's origins. So had she been the one to build the actual elevator and place a lid over it? Controlling a great power was harder than creating it. That was an impressive accomplish in and of itself.

Boo Boo had once said that the humans had suddenly appeared in Ground's Nir one day and started challenging the Labyrinth. That supposedly held back the disaster spewing forth from the depths of the dark hole. And that was why the humans might be messengers of heaven.

She was down there.

The Sage was headed straight for the bottom of the Labyrinth.

"Boo Boo, and everyone else too. There's something I want to say before we jump in."

"What is it, Beatrice?"

"Well." The Holy Swordswoman took a slow breath. "To be honest, the Sage is powerful. I don't know if we can defeat her even with everyone here working together. I don't want to lose no matter what and I want to bring everyone back alive, but we need to consider the worst case scenario."

"Wh-what are you trying to say?"

"It's simple."

She shut her eyes, removed the final barrier, and forced her eyes

back open.

And she spoke to them all.

“If it looks like we can’t avoid being wiped out and won’t be able to stop the Sage, then kill me. That might just erase the Sage.”

The atmosphere seemed to freeze.

“Hey, wait, hey!”

The first to erupt was Armelina.

“Didn’t I tell you? The Sage didn’t necessarily use a Gate to travel through time. She might have adjusted her Percentage-type equipment until she looked just like you. We can’t say for sure she traveled to the distant past from the distant future! Besides, if your death would directly affect her as a time paradox, she wouldn’t treat your life with such reckless abandon!”

“I don’t fully believe it myself.”

“Then!!”

“So this is a hypothetical. If we know none of us is going to make it back alive and the Sage seems to be holding back to keep just me alive, we need to suspect that’s why. And we need to try every method available to us. Killing me might not change anything, but then again, it might. If we have no other option, then that’s our last resort. I don’t think we should give up without trying it.”

“Are you insane!? Even if the attack on the Iberian Orc village was done by you from the future, that’s something you can stop based on your actions now, isn’t it!? You may not be able to change the past, but you can change your own future!!”

Beatrice could not nod or shake her head.

No one could guarantee she really could change her own future with her current decisions.

Nor could they guarantee that changing the past with her current decisions was the right thing to do.

“Beatrice.” Boo Boo brought a hand to his mouth. “If what I’m about to say is completely misguided, then you can get mad at me. So will you hear me out?”

“What is it?”

“Boo,” groaned the gray pig-faced giant.

He cut right to the chase.

“Beatrice, are you afraid? Afraid of what you might do?”

The crimson Holy Swordswoman, one of the strongest level cappers, jumped like a scolded child. She said nothing for a while, so Boo Boo simply waited.

And finally, Beatrice, who normally acted like a big sister, opened her trembling lips like she had lost a test of endurance.

“…I am afraid.”

She hung her head and did not look up.

She could not look Boo Boo in the eye even after spending so much time with him.

“Of course I’m afraid!! I did something in the future? It can’t be overturned because it happened at a set point in the past? How can I accept it when someone says that was my crime!? I would never do that and I would never hurt you or the other Iberian Orcs for any reason! Just thinking about purging the village makes my skin crawl!! But I have no way of proving that here! No matter what

theories we propose and no matter how much you say it'll be okay, there's still a 1% chance, isn't there!? There's still a slight chance that I'm just a bad person and that I'm a hopeless piece of shit that could take everything from you after smiling by your side!!!!!"

"…"

"I hate it!! Of course I hate it!! I'm afraid of having this set in stone, but I can't relax when it isn't settled either! I mean…how!? How do I stop a crime I can't imagine I'll ever commit!? Will my death solve everything, or is it all a bluff and that won't solve anything? I don't even know the answer to that, so I'm afraid! I'm just so very afraid!!!!!"

It was possible not even Boo Boo knew how to respond to a girl who was so badly shaken up. He had challenged a 1000m dragon to a fight and cut through a group of delinquent soldiers, but he may have been helpless here.

But as awkward as he might be, he made an attempt.

He did not have to be clever about it.

"Beatrice. It's true you might not be able to change the future no matter what you do. You might not be able to overturn something that happened in the past. The truth might be the worst one we can think of and simply learning of it will cause great pain. But…"

He paused, but did not stop.

He had more to say.

"Even if we find that worst answer, I still want to be by your side."

She had no words.

Beatrice's breath seemed to have caught in her throat as she looked up at Boo Boo.

He had a kind look in his eyes.

“Even if you really are the one who destroyed my village and even if you are the person trying to bring a great storm to Ground’s Nir again, I will still forgive you. I will still be your friend. So I won’t let the truth take you from me. I won’t let something like that take away someone I care for. Don’t worry, Beatrice. I’m with you.”

“…No one else would forgive me.”

“That doesn’t matter. All of the villagers’ souls are in this Shining Weapon and they might be angry when they hear about it, but I’m willing to fight for you. I’ll have a fistfight with them all after resurrecting them.”

“I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself.”

“Then I’ll fight you again. I won’t even let you hurt you. I don’t care if no one understands or if it makes you my enemy. I’m fine getting covered in scars to protect you.”

She could not get any more actual words out.

Beatrice clung to and buried her face in someone who had been with her for so long. She abandoned the face of the reliable big sister and wept like a young child.

“…There is nothing worse than this,” announced Boo Boo as he wiped her tears away with a large finger. “So, Beatrice, don’t fear the worst. Even if you draw that card, nothing will change. I won’t go anywhere.”

Part 7

Once Beatrice had calmed down, they took specific action.

The elevator descending into the abyss was still moving. Climbing into that pit would take them to the Sage. They would definitely meet her. But that would undoubtedly develop into a fight to the death.

“We never did figure anything out about Lorelei, but given the situation…”

“Yes. We should assume it has already fallen into the Sage’s hands.”

As Filinion and Wildefrau discussed that, Armelina manipulated her Shining Weapon metal staff. The weapon specialized in physical attacks and could transform into almost any blunt weapon, but one of those was the breaking wheel, an execution device modelled after a giant gear.

“The gear shape isn’t really necessary for beating people, so there are apparently theories that it was originally a ritual tool used to worship a sun god. Anyway, I think we can get down if I make sure the teeth fit into the jagged rails.”

Boo Boo did not need to rely on any tools. He peered into the hole without anything in his hands. He seemed intent on grabbing the metal rails and using his grip strength to slide down.

Boo Boo and Armelina.

They had 2 different methods of descent, but…

“…” (←Beatrice climbing onto Boo Boo’s big head.)

“…” (←Filinion clinging to Boo Boo’s thick waist.)

“…” (←Wildefrau holding onto Boo Boo’s muscular leg.)

“Well, I can sure see how much you all trust me!! But climbing down on my own will be easier anyway!! Ga ha ha goddammit!!”

Regardless, it was time to get started.

Boo Boo and Armelina both used the elevator’s gear shafts to slide down the vertical walls.

They could not see the bottom and they could not predict how far down they would have to go, but they did see some unexpected

“changes”.

“What are these? Layers?” asked Armelina as she watched the wall so she could continually adjust her speed on the giant gear.

There were indeed strange layered pattern, like in a baumkuchen or mille-feuille, but these layers were not simply dirt or rock. One layer was packed full of rusty nails, one was filled with wood materials, one contained giant macarons and whipped cream, and one was a solid layer of large clock hands. No two were the same.

Filinion spoke in a trembling voice while clinging to Boo Boo’s waist from the side.

“So high, so high, so high… I’m scared, I’m scared, I’m scared… But wait, isn’t this Steam Grave 80, Clockwork Resistance 22, Sweets Circuit 32, and Clock Party 45? E-eeeeeeek…”

“That just shows how much we’re skipping past with this shortcut. Honestly, I feel like half of my life is being rejected after risking my life exploring through all that.”

The pit was known as the Central Shaft, but it was not just a straight shot down. The route probably changed automatically so it avoided the other rooms and passageways as the Labyrinth irregularly changed shape. Again and again, it bent at right angles to travel sometimes vertically and sometimes horizontally. The fixation on 90 degree angles may have been to lay out the rails like a jungle gym and thus allow a flat-sided elevator to travel freely in any direction.

Boo Boo and the others picked up speed in the vertical portions and converted their potential energy into kinetic energy to clear the horizontal portions like it was a roller coaster.

The long, long pit twisted and turned like a great serpent with no end in sight.

And she was up ahead.

The Sage. That woman who looked just like Beatrice but was fundamentally different.

Part 8

In the Detached Magic Palace of Roppongi, Tokyo…

“Phew.”

Unless an old-fashioned banquet happened to be held there, the large mansion was always wrapped in deep darkness at night. But that did not mean there was no one inside. Even now, the maid named Iroka wore a cardigan over a dark red camisole, tensed her beautiful face with glasses and a mole below the eye, and stared at the computer in her room.

As rare as they were these days, she had a tower-style computer designed with internal upgrades in mind, but it was nothing more than a terminal. The actual computer was a giant supercomputer filling 1/3 of the space below the Detached Magic Palace’s grounds.

She tapped her glasses by her temple a few times and then searched through the past logs yet again. It did not add up no matter how many times she checked, but it had happened regardless.

This was the eldest sister’s room, but Misoka, the 2nd sister, was lying on the bed in a bath towel and munching on fried squid.

“How many times have you checked now? I’m telling you, you just aren’t going to find how she got in.”

“This is my duty.”

“Governments and agencies around the world are trying to track down where Tselika went. This is out of our hands.”

Yes.

The Nonhuman named Tselika had apparently contacted their master, the girl in a red dress, via her smartphone, but they had failed to trace the connection or even detect its presence at all. The short message still found on the smartphone was starting to feel like a ghost. There was a slight possibility she had forced her way in or taken advantage of some kind of vulnerability, but as time passed, they should have been able to at least figure out what route she used. But this time, there was nothing. When Iroka had first received the report, she had honestly felt her loyalty waver for just a moment. As inappropriate as it was, she had suspected the red dress girl had faked it to test their security.

“A fair amount of time has passed since Tselika made contact.”

“Just a few days.”

“But every government and every agency have been working nonstop and have yet to track her down. At this point, I can only describe it as abnormal.”

They both fell silent at Iroka’s comment.

The look on their faces said they could already partially guess the likely answer.

“If this goes higher than the governments or agencies, there’s only one possibility.”

“Are you suggesting she has reached those Over the Wall people?”

At that moment, a new window opened in a corner of the screen. It

was an intruder alert, but from an odd location. Instead of the main gate or the mansion's front door, a door within the building had opened and closed.

"Curse those perimeter guards. What are they even doing?"

"Did someone get in without the PSIA guards noticing?"

It was like the footprints of a ghost.

What route had they used to get inside?

"…"

"…"

The maids exchanged a glance and then slowly stood up. Glasses Iroka threw a few small bottles of lotion into her stockings while Sporty Misoka removed the lampshade from a large lamp in a corner of the room.

"You're kidding right? So with this kind of skill, would it have to be an Over the Wall?"

"It's too soon to say, but Miss does seem to be having some kind of conflict with the Sage."

"Either way, Tselika and the Sage are both Over the Wall."

The maids were tasked with guarding and defending the mansion if it came to it, but they had not been issued any obvious blades or firearms. That was of course to avoid providing political enemies with fodder for scandals. They would rearrange everyday items to kill any heavily-equipped criminal and insist that it had all been justified self-defense. That was the sort of combat skill demanded of maids sent by the state.

The 2nd sister slowly opened the room's door, checked the dark

hallway, and took the lead.

“But why the kitchen? Are they trying to poison the food?”

“Yet if they don’t care if it looks like homicide, there are much simpler and more reliable methods.”

The mansion was large, but they still stopped whispering when they approached the kitchen.

They communicated using hand signals and continued on in.

They could hear it.

There was a disconcerting rummaging sound.

“(The refrigerator.)”

“(The poisoning might be a diversion. Once we’ve settled things with this intruder, we need to check over the entire grounds for bombs or gas containers.)”

It was fortunate their red dress master was absent, but if the Gate was destroyed, she would be unable to return from Ground’s Nir, so the danger remained. They had to quickly settle things with whoever was in the kitchen and then search the entire area.

“(There’s a single person in front of the refrigerator. I’ll charge in, so you follow after a short delay.)”

“(Understood. But we cannot tell how they are equipped with the refrigerator door in the way. If the initial attack fails to finish them off, prepare to keep going even if they take me out.)”

They did not need a countdown.

The 2 maids swiftly but silently charged into the dark kitchen. Whoever was busy sabotaging the contents of the fridge turned

back toward them and the fridge's light illuminated their face.

"Mutter, mutter. Whah ish it, Onee-hyan and Onee-hyan?"

Haruka, the 3rd sister, held a giant sausage in her mouth and carried pork pate, ham, bacon, olives, oil sardines, a menma bottle, bamboo kamaboko, chikuwa, and more in her arms. The glutton wore only the top of a track suit and her small head wobbled back and forth.

While half-asleep, she had apparently been hungry, wandered around, tripped various sensors, and finally reached the kitchen refrigerator.

That would explain the lack of a response from the main gate on the perimeter and the mansion's front entrance.

The 2 older sisters slowly let out a long, long sigh.

And…

Whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap, whap!!

"Gya, gyaaaaahh!? Eh? Eh? Huh? Why am I in here!? And why are both of you spanking me at once!!!???"

Part 9

"I don't know when exactly it is."

In the corner of a room in a completely normal inn in the inn town, Living Spring Roll Sibyl had wrapped multiple sheets around herself to hide her bandaged but otherwise naked body.

“But at some point, the world approaches the moment of its demise. That is hardly surprising since everything ends eventually, but the Sage has apparently directly faced that moment.”

“…So she was sent to the past to cut through that disaster?”

Huldra urged her on with a frown. Doomsday scenarios were common topics of discussion, but she and the others who worked in the underside of history were aware how surprisingly stable the world was. The kind of all-out nuclear war seen in cheap SF movies could not occur so easily.

But Sibyl shook her head.

“No, that’s not quite the right way to look at it. Think of it like a thought experiment where the technology to travel through time is publicly available and not monopolized by anyone.”

“Publicly available…?”

Rusalka trailed off.

Next to her, Huldra drank a clear red liquid. It was probably a perfume that changed her scent from within. As an Alchemist Cheerleader who manipulated her Hate value with makeup, she may have been secretly working at Sibyl’s mind.

Had the Royal Elf intended to reveal everything from the beginning, or was she being lured into it?

Sheet Bagworm Sibyl slowly sighed and kept speaking as if slowly turning some heavy gears.

“They would have no way of knowing if sending someone special to the past would definitively overturn the future. They would not even know if destiny can be manipulated by human hands.”

“Where are you going with this?”

“There would be no need to limit themselves to just one person or to even continue thinking about changing the future.”

The others had a bad feeling about this.

This was supposedly a hypothetical story, but alarm bells went off in the back of Gruagach’s mind, telling her she must not listen to any more of this.

But Sibyl kept talking. As if it was some form of harassment.

“Couldn’t they just send all 7 or 8 billion of them into the distant past?”

It was a frightening idea.

They did not know what kind of problem would occur in the distant future. But even if everyone returned to a point in the past when resources and food were plentiful, what would happen when that many people arrived all at once? The planet would surely be eaten away into a desert planet in no time.

“Well, there’s another trick to it beyond that.”

“?”

“Whatever the case, that does not happen. Because someone already stopped it. Can you now imagine where the Sage may have come from?”

“What are you talking about…?”

“Kudryavka.”

She spoke a certain name.

“The Sage would often call herself that in a self-deprecating way. According to her, she was the final test model and the rest of

mankind was meant to follow after her if she succeeded."

"But that didn't happen. So was the Sage deemed a failure?"

"If so, she could not be here now."

There was only one other possibility: she had succeeded, but the migration of mankind had not begun. Why would that be? There was only one answer that would lead to that contradictory conclusion.

"After the Sage traveled back on time, she used all of her power to go around destroying the technology needed for 4th-dimensional travel. Thus, no one else could follow. To protect everything else, she abandoned her own era. She decided to take a one-way trip."

The name Kudryavka had been mentioned.

That dog had become history's first to leave the earth when placed on a spaceship launched by the Soviets. The data taken from her had been used to ensure a safe trip to space, but her own safety had not been guaranteed.

"She had no place on Earth, so she apparently found living as a stranger in Ground's Nir more comfortable. Her friendship with the Iberian Orcs was not done out of self-interest. She was saved by the kindness of those who reached out a hand when she thought she could only wander for all eternity."

But good intentions did not necessarily lead to good actions.

"But that is why," said Sibyl, "the Sage cannot stop now. She was unable to save those who saved her and they even thanked her for killing them, so she was not even given a chance to be judged for her crimes. And I do not think she was wrong either. She pulled that sorrowful trigger to oppose where the world was headed."

Part 10

In her red armor and white miniskirt, the Sage stood motionless in the center of the elevator that was too large to ride alone but too small for the powerful Iberian Orcs to ride as a group.

She had constructed it at the request of the elder and other Iberian Orcs. The Enter Kosmos project to the east had attempted to stop the irregular changes to the Labyrinth by forcibly driving a giant wedge into it, but since that had failed miserably, she had not stuck to that shape. The shaft bent flexibly to match the Labyrinth's changes and automatically redesigned itself to reach the bottom without running into the rooms or pathways, no matter what structure they had. She had been ecstatic upon completing it, but even this large elevator had not been enough to carry them all. They seemed to mostly use their great muscular strength to directly cling to the shaft and descend that way.

(And in the end, it comes to this.)

It had taken quite a long time, but nothing had gone according to plan. Boo Boo had not created a new village. Sibyl's intellectual mind had failed to comprehend the Iberian Orc tactics which were rooted in combat instincts, so her false reproductions created from residual memories had only been able to do so much. It had taken far too many corpses to create just the one Disaster, so a mass-produced unit had been out of reach.

And now Lorelei.

It now behaved like one of the Break News, but the Sage herself had originally created it as a demonic sword that easily placed its wielder in the position of the strongest. She had hoped to create a power to use in place of the Iberian Orcs who had felt bound by their duty. In the end, its immense power would drive your body

and mind out of control if you did not gradually familiarize yourself with its power in stages, so she had been forced to leave it in the hands of the Iberian Orcs who already knew how to control great strength.

Lorelei had remained in their village for a while and she had asked them to use their excellent minds to construct a means of perfectly controlling it, but it had gone missing during the confusion of the purge. Their elder had bowed down to her and insisted it was necessary, but she was still ashamed. She had worked alongside the delinquent soldiers of Elkiad, so some idiot must have stooped to looting as well as slaughtering.

The Iberian Orcs had been everything to her.

When she described it as an enjoyable period of her life, it was always their smiling faces that came to mind.

She still remembered it so vividly.

The round children had looked like stuffed animals as they ran around the village. Those true heroes had had the greatest power and yet had not drowned in it. They had never used their strength for anything besides their self-sufficient lifestyle or their duty to protect everyone. They had lived a simple but warm life in the village. To avoid unnecessary confusion, the Sage had arrived through a tunnel leading directly to the elder’s house from an area far from the village, but listening to the happy voices outside the house and peeking out through the gaps in the large leaf entrance had cleansed her heart.

They had asked her to tell them a human word that represented the ideas of “amazing”, “big”, and “reliable” and she had answered half in jest, so she had panicked a little when it had stuck.

They had been kind people.

As a result of breeding with all kinds of animals and plants and taking in the strengths of those other species, they had been stuck on the path of decay, as if their blood was rusting. But even though she had been no help there, they had thanked the Sage to the very, very end.

They had asked her to look after the sole surviving child and the world.

They had said she could handle the task posed by the Ground's Nir monster awaiting completion in the depths of the Labyrinth.

That was all there was.

Traces of happiness. Dregs of kindness.

The Sage had utterly ended it all and that was why she had had nothing else to cling to.

It must have been a complete disaster for those caught in the middle. This enveloped both Earth and Ground's Nir, so she could not look anyone in the eye.

But she would follow through to the end.

She might become a wandering empty shell of a person, detached from reality, but she would keep the promise she had made, no matter how twisted it had become.

That was her decision.

So…

"I wonder if Boo Boo will show up even though he knows he'll lose."

As soon as she whispered that, a gray pig-faced giant fell atop the giant single-panel elevator. The Sage was truly frustrated to see Beatrice, Filinion, Armelina, and Wildefrau with him. If the shape of

his bonds had been just a little twisted or if he had held even a hint of obvious wicked thoughts or greed, he might have done exactly what the elder had wanted and attempted to fight the monster with a new village.

Once her thoughts reached that point, a faint smile appeared on the Sage's lips.

…I suppose that wasn't really an option.

The Sage was a woman, so if she had wanted to, she could have approached ignorant Boo Boo and introduced him to such things. But she could not imagine that working. If Boo Boo had been knowledgeable in such things and continued making the same choices, she doubted he would have gathered as many companions. The Sage had felt no qualms about involving 2 entire worlds for her own dried-out objective, but even she had been hesitant to destroy that.

Beatrice had been clinging to Boo Boo's head, but she jumped down to the floor and asked a question.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing really."

The Sage casually responded while lightly tapping the pommel of her sheathed Shining Weapon.

She spoke to the girl standing beside the gray pig-faced giant. To someone who was doing something she never could.

"I just thought it was interesting that everything you are building up will create my own flesh and blood."

"I have no interest in who you are. Even if you are me. Boo Boo said he would forgive me even if I committed a great crime. He said he would forgive me even as I pitifully trembled in fear of

punishment! So I won't fear the worst case scenario. Even if there is no changing what you did, I can flatten it down and begin building anew! And I'll build up all sorts of things you never did!!"

"I see, I see, I see."

The beautiful woman in red armor and a miniskirt repeated the phrase in a singsong way and stopped toying with the pommel. She used her dominant left hand to silently squeeze the grip of the sheathed Shining Weapon rapier.

She had slayed many foes on the way here. The remains of their Shining Weapons could be seen as gravestones and she had gathered them all together to expand this weapon.

She drew that tower of death.

The distorted blade shined and an even more tattered smile appeared on her face as she spoke.

"That's really not fair, Beatrice."

Part 11

Even as she spoke those words, a sinister magic circle danced on the Sage's back and the hellfire produced by the pieced-together sword in her left hand fully blossomed as a bright and colorful flower.

"Fire Thro-…"

"Metal Je- Black Smo- Napalm Fi- Cause an Expl- Fry As- Shockwa- Steam We- Spark Stor- Hot Fire!"

She stuck to fire. Before Beatrice could release a single piece of Magic, the Sage simply spun the tip of her sword in a large circle to send out a fierce storm of dozens…no, a hundred times as much Magic. Beatrice had learned a total of 14,000 Magic spells, but she was still swallowed up by the maelstrom of light and sound, even if she could still neutralize all damage with her 100% Fire Resistance.

“Beatrice!!”

The first to move was Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau who specialized in the opposite Water Element. There was no need to hold back at this point. She released the many belts binding her body, grabbed the cross-shaped sword, and forcefully drew it from the scabbard. It produced true absolute zero. A magic circle appeared in the center of the cross-shaped sword. By freezing everything, including normal gases like oxygen and hydrogen, it provided the triple threat of extreme low temperature, asphyxiation, and no air pressure. That made it a cruel but powerful anti-personnel attack.

Wildefrau’s absolute zero vacuum provided similar damage to throwing one’s opponent into cold outer space where no sunlight reached, but…

“100% Water Resistance. Did you think only you could use that?”

“Wha-!?”

Those simple words overturned everything. The woman who should have died did not. Wildefrau was as confused as someone seeing a decapitated knight continue to walk around, but the hands of the clock were still moving.

And it was not the Ice Waterfall Princess that the Sage singled out.

She continued to wear down Beatrice, but with a maelstrom of Water Element Magic this time.

“Water Je- Liquid Hamm- Teamwo- Bock Bod- Sickle Mete- Aqua Clo- Cloud Whi- Snake Wat- Light Blood!”

There was no relying on Elemental Defense this time. Even the red veteran Holy Swordswoman would take damage from water Magic. All sorts of Magic poured toward her like horizontal rain and a single hit would tear her body limb from limb and blow her to pieces.

“…!!!???”

Wildefrau placed a magic circle on her sword and rushed in between them.

She had 100% Water Resistance. For this one moment, she could negate any damage from 100 or even 1000 attacks at once.

“In that case…”

Something audibly sliced sharply through the air as the Sage pointed her patchwork rapier toward the heavens.

“Wind or Earth? Wouldn’t 100 attacks from either splatter you across the floor in a single second?”

“!! Boo Boo, match your timing to mine!! It’s time to attack!!”

“Boo!! Understood, Armelina!!”

A rush from anything but Fire or Water would crush them all before they could dodge or defend, so the only way to survive was to make sure the Sage did not have time to leisurely use that Magic. Boo Boo and Armelina’s thinking was not exactly wrong.

However…

“Not good enough.”

She spun around.

Showing no concern for the miniskirt exposing her thighs right up to the base, the Sage whirled her body around. Once she had built up plenty of centrifugal force, she released a high spin kick toward the center of 4m Boo Boo's gut. He placed his thick Shining Weapon in the way to defend, but it was all useless. The immense kinetic energy released from her heel caused the pig-faced giant to bend and then fly backwards.

"…!!!!!!"

Armelina clenched her teeth, but she could only continue on while assuming Boo Boo had given her an opening. They had attacked simultaneously, so the Sage's body was defenselessly exposed after launching the wide spin kick. Armelina could do it now. She changed her Shining Weapon metal staff into a ball-and-chain and raised it in preparation.

Then the Sage vanished.

A silver flash of light took her place. Time seemed to stop and the cold realization that she was about to be cut through raced down Armelina's back. She had concluded the flash came from a blade.

But she was wrong.

It was instead the path of the Sage's heel blurring like a tail light.

She had no idea how many times she was hit.

Countless dull pains raced through her entire body, she entered a tailspin, and she rolled backwards.

"Ah, ah, ahhh…"

The direct combat level cappers and the Iberian Orc had been swept aside in the blink of an eye. Filinion, their healer, was the only one left and she felt like she was inside a castle tower as the castle burned and fell to the enemy.

The Sage spun around to look her way.

She looked the defenseless White Witch in her fearful eyes.

She adjusted her grip on the patchwork Shining Weapon and moved her alluring lips to whisper the words of death.

“Blade Roc-…”

A giant form charged in toward the Sage from the side. After being knocked away, Boo Boo had gotten back up and, without using his log of a Shining Weapon, made a full-power tackle as if to shatter the Sage’s slender waist.

Not even a large trailer truck crashing at full speed could have produced as dreadful a noise.

But…

“100% Impact Resistance.”

She was unharmed. Entirely unscathed.

The Sage’s slender waist was fine and her feet had not slid even a centimeter along the floor.

“You can do it with physical attacks too!?”

Armelina roared at her from the floor, but the Sage remained motionless. Her fist flew toward defenseless Boo Boo with her weapon’s handguard acting like brass knuckles. Someone on her level would be able to beat down an Iberian Orc while unarmed. And once that was complete, she would take out their healer, Filinion. The White Witch was the cornerstone of their tactics, so with her gone, Beatrice and the others would be tormented to death.

But the great noise that burst out was metallic in nature.

It was not the sound of flesh being struck.

Then everyone noticed that Boo Boo had just barely slipped his Shining Weapon in to block the handguard the Sage tried to hit him with. Unlike the previous spin kick, this attack had not had her body weight or centrifugal force behind it.

The sound of his bones creaking filled the space.

With the Sage's strength, breaking the weapon and Boo Boo's arm would be a simple task. But Boo Boo was not defeated. He could not be broken here.

"I won't give up. I will reach a future where Beatrice and the others can return with smiles on their faces…"

"That isn't your decision." The Sage's expression was unconcerned. "It is mine as the victor."

With another great noise, the Sage's eyebrows rose slightly. It was the look of someone finding a supposedly simple calculation was not adding up. She seemed to find it odd that he still persisted.

"Besides, there was something strange about what Beatrice and the others said and what you said. It never made much sense to me."

"For example?"

The patchwork blade grew red hot.

Many pieces of Fire Magic struck Boo Boo like a point-blank range shotgun blast. He did not have Elemental Defense like Beatrice and the others did. If he did not dodge, he had to hope his tough skin could stop it. But he clenched his teeth. Even as he slid along the floor, he swung his Shining Weapon and knocked down the next round of Magic.

“If you really are Beatrice, why do you hold your sword in your left hand? Beatrice has always been right-handed!”

“Ha ha. Is that all!? How much time do you think I spent coming this far, Boo Boo? Is it that surprising that a few traits might change in that time?”

Something swished through the air again and again.

The smiling Sage was tossing her patchwork sword from one hand to the other and back again.

“Besides, I’m just as strong with my right.”

“That’s enough, Boo Boo! Dodge!!”

Beatrice’s shout was immediately followed by dozens of ice spears flying toward the Iberian Orc. He shattered them with his giant Shining Weapon, but the small shards were still sharp blades. This only increased the number of attacks and his entire body was exposed to a downpour of glass.

A rusty smell filled the space.

But Boo Boo did not give up. Even with his tough skin torn and bloody, his knees did not bend.

“Bh, gh…squeal… And that weapon…is strange too. I don’t really get the Magic that humans use, but Beatrice’s has a cleaner shape. It’s not all pieced together and beaten up like that…!”

“Wouldn’t it be odder if I was still using the same weapon after so much time? The march of technological progress is a fast one. Clinging to an obsolete Shining Weapon would only work against me.”

This time, it was wind.

Several violent gusts whirled around the Sage and detonated on her signal. An invisible wall raged out with the force of an explosion and pushed the ice blades even deeper into Boo Boo's flesh.

There was a low roar, but Boo Boo planted his feet firmly on the floor and held his ground.

No scream escaped his tightly clenched teeth. He was still fighting.

"Then!! It really is strange!!"

"Boo…Boo…?"

Battered Beatrice looked up at that precious person's profile.

He continued glaring at the Sage and spoke words sharper than the ice blades.

"Then why are you wearing the same red armor as Beatrice!? You said it yourself: technology progresses quickly, so you wouldn't stick with the same equipment forever! I know humans wear Magic in the shape of clothes. And I know a single choice can change their strength considerably! So!! It makes no sense for you to choose the exact same clothes as the Beatrice here 'now'!! It would only make sense if you were wearing something else entirely!!!!!"

"…Ah…"

Beatrice looked back and forth between the Sage and Boo Boo.

The Sage was still smiling. No, it looked more like her smile had frozen.

"The tree diagram of Magic is not infinite. There is a limit that-…"

"If Beatrice was already the strongest she could be and had no room for growth and thus no reason to change her clothes, then it makes no sense for there to be such a large gap between your

powers.”

Yes.

That was right.

The Sage’s Stats were ridiculous, but she would have to rely on her Percentage-type equipment that was her clothing. But in that case, why did she look so much like Beatrice? If she was dressed the same as Beatrice, she would have the same adjustments as Beatrice. But that was not the case. The Sage had made an unnecessary detour to dress just like Beatrice and yet produce entirely different values. That would be 2 or 3 times more difficult than simply coordinating her outfit for optimal strength.

Why would she go to all that extra effort?

What reason was there besides fooling someone and deceiving everyone?

“I know.” Bloody Boo Boo spoke while breathing heavily. “I’ve watched Beatrice more than anyone, so I know things about her not even she knows. There’s a small mole on the back of her neck near the nape, hidden by her long hair. You wouldn’t have known that was there!!”

Beatrice gasped and reached for the back of her neck.

If this was the same person with the same equipment, that would be definitive proof. If there was no mole on the Sage’s neck, it would mean she was not the same person as the real Beatrice.

The Sage remained motionless for a while.

Then her empty right hand silently moved. It looked like she was brushing back her long hair, but that was not it.

She was revealing the nape of her neck behind the left ear. Seeing

that, Beatrice's vision nearly blacked out. The Sage was not hiding it. Nor was she hesitating. Which meant…

"Is this good enough for you, Boo Boo?"

Beatrice felt a shock like having a stake driven through her heart. He had said he would forgive her and he had consoled her, telling her not to fear the worst, but it still weighed heavily on her to have it confirmed as truth.

"Yes."

But that was not what this was.

Boo Boo had more to say.

"That's enough. Beatrice has no mole on the back of her neck."

This time, the flow of time really did seem to freeze.

Beatrice could not check the back of her neck, so she had to receive confirmation from Wildefrau who had fallen in a tangled pile with her.

"You're kidding… There really isn't anything there…???"

After initially adjusting your appearance, it would not change within Ground's Nir even if you put on or took off your equipment. That meant the Sage had to have done something else to add this mole. Perhaps some kind of disguise Magic.

"Having everything go your way ended up working against you, Sage. But I won't let your disguise fool me any longer."

Once more…no, as many times as it took, Boo Boo moved his bloody body, clenched his teeth, and adjusted his grip on his Shining Weapon.

“You aren’t Beatrice. I can tell because I’ve watched her more than anyone. I don’t know who you are, but I know more about Beatrice than you do!”

“…So what?”

The weapon in her left hand and the entire left half of the Sage’s body were enveloped in hellfire.

This was somehow different from before. He had incurred her wrath now.

“What does it matter that you’ve found some excuse to claim I’m not Beatrice, Boo Boo!?”

Boo Boo spun his Shining Weapon around and held it tightly.

And he made an announcement as if to shake off the ominous rusty smell of death with his own bestial odor.

“Isn’t it obvious? Now I have no reason to hold back as I beat you to a pulp.”

Part 12

When you got down to it, this was only an issue of the heart. No matter how much he cornered her with his words, he could not overturn the actual difference in power.

Or so it might seem, but that was not true.

The previous exchange had contained a truly important fact.

“Hmm?”

In an inn room, Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra sat in a chair with one leg bent so she could use a small piece of cotton soaked in nail polish remover to remove the pedicure adorning her toenails. This was a very risqué pose with regards to her mini-China pajamas and the base of her thighs.

She was adjusting her Hate value to loosen Sibyl’s tongue.

Sibyl stared at those toes as she spoke.

“For one thing, how was the Sage able to reproduce Beatrice’s appearance so thoroughly? Adjusting her equipment can theoretically induce a certain amount of change, but reproducing it to that level would be nearly impossible. But that is why you can find such deep karma there.”

“?”

“I said that all of mankind planned to migrate into the past to escape destruction in the distant future, didn’t I? But simply transferring the people would cause the world’s resources and food supply to dry up in no time. Simply put, the total population would more than double in size with the people of the future and the past.”

“Are you saying there was a way to solve that problem?” asked Gruagach.

“It’s something you all have come into contact without questioning it.”

While wrapped up as a living spring roll in a corner of the room, Sibyl flicked something into the air using her thumb.

It was one of the Gimmick Gears used as currency.

“Now, a question: why is this Gear considered to be as valuable as money?”

“Well, because analyzing the Gear can provide a lot of Experience P-…”

Rusalka trailed off.

Huldra and Gruagach exchanged a glance.

“Yes.” Sibyl toyed with the Gear in her hand. “Experience Points.”

A great roar exploded out.

The Sage’s attack was as fierce as ever and facing it head-on would undoubtedly lead to death.

Fire, Water, Wind, Earth…and various kinds of physical attacks. She fully covered all Elements and truly stood at the peak of all Magic, so a straight fight with her would be suicide.

Or it should have been.

However…

“Boo!! Beatrice, Wildefrau!! Don’t stay in one place!! We all need to surround her!! She doesn’t want us to attack from multiple directions at once!!”

Boo Boo gave instructions while holding White Witch Filinion under his arm.

“…”

For the Sage, crushing them one at a time was a surefire way of destroying them as they surrounded her, so she should not have needed to panic. However…

“Armelina!!”

A splendid metallic sound shook the air.

The Sage’s eyes had pursued Wildefrau and her 100% Water Resistance, but a ball-and-chain had slammed into her from the side.

However, the Sage had not even bothered to block it with her patchwork blade. The metal ball had collided with her temple, but she did not so much as budge.

She glared over at the Fighter Priest.

“100% Impact Resistance. Have you already forgotten?”

“…!!”

Armelina began flinch back, but Boo Boo gave a shout.

“That doesn’t matter!! It’s true hitting you won’t get through to you, but as long as we keep hitting you, you have to keep defending against those attacks. You can’t ignore them! After all…!!”

“Ah,” said Filinion as he carried her around.

Boo Boo filled in the puzzle pieces.

“You don’t always have full coverage for every Element! Boo, it’s the same as that mole! You swap in the Element you need at the moment, so it looks like you’re fine no matter what!!”

It was true that the Sage had let fly great torrents of Magic and that she had swapped out the Element to attack the weaknesses in their Elemental Defenses.

But she had never used multiple Elements at once.

When using fire, she had used only fire. When using ice, she had

used only ice.

Altogether, it looked like she was using every Element, but when looking at any moment in isolation, it looked like she was focusing on a single Element!

“Your total amount of Experience Points wasn’t that different from ours,” said Beatrice in shock.

And her voice soon rose to a shout.

“But those Experience Points aren’t fixed!? Are you freely reallocating them however you see fit!? Is that why it looks so much like you have every Element!?”

“…!!!???”

A single mole could move beyond the psychological and change the tide of an actual battle. To support Armelina, Boo Boo grabbed his giant Shining Weapon and faced the Sage once more.

All so that he could pass the final baton to Beatrice, who he so cared for!!

“So what will happen if Beatrice or Wildefrau attack you with fire or ice as if stabbing you in the side? You have to keep defending against the hits from the front, so you won’t be able to defend against the other Element!”

The air roared.

The air wrapped stickily around Armelina’s blunt weapon and Beatrice’s flames as they swung their Shining Weapons toward the Sage.

“…No.”

But.

But.

But!!

“100% Impact Resistance. 100% Fire Resistance.”

Her voice was no more than a whisper.

She did not fall back even after having her secret revealed. The Sage exposed her body to the multiple attacks and stood stock still with a grin on her lips.

“Have you forgotten? I can freely reallocate my Experience Points. This isn’t a problem as long as I can reach for multiple Elemental Defenses instead of focusing on just one.”

It was a nightmarish answer.

Armelina had attacked from the front and Beatrice from the side, but the Sage was unharmed. That vision was more effective at breaking their will to fight than any attack.

But they still could not give up.

There was no need to.

People who only believed what they saw with their own eyes would be fooled by prestidigitation. But if they thought about it for themselves and made links in their mind, they would not be led astray.

“Boo. Then why didn’t you do that from the beginning?”

“…”

“You had no real reason to hold back. There’s only one reason why you would still stick to using only one Element for attack and defense.”

“Sage, it may be true you can reach multiple Elemental Defenses at once.”

Beatrice kept pushing on her blade that would never reach her opponent and she smiled at close range. The magic circle on her back spewed explosive flames.

“But once you do that, you lose your all-around perfection. After all, the total amount of Experience Points available to you doesn’t change! Reaching 100% resistance isn’t easy. The quadratic curve requires so many Experience Points as you approach 100% that a lot of people claim it simply isn’t worth it! Once you’ve applied your Experience Points to reach 100% for multiple Elemental Defenses, you don’t have enough left over for any attack Magic, do you? In that case, your situation will only get worse and worse!!”

At first glance, it might seem that the Sage still had the superior position.

Even if she could not attack, she maintained her invincibility. So it might sound like she only had to close herself up and wait for a chance to counterattack.

“You understand, don’t you?”

But that was not the case.

The crux of the issue lay elsewhere.

“Our equipment is Percentage-type Magic that takes that form. We can’t wear equipment that forcibly increases our Parameters by surpassing the limits of our Willpower. We select equipment that fits within the determined value and use what’s left over for our Command-type Magic.”

Beatrice pierced right to the center.

She pushed her rapier forward with her dominant hand while using

her other to point back over her shoulder with her thumb.

“So you can’t keep defending forever. You have Impact Resistance and Fire Resistance, but we still have Wildefrau. She can slice you with her sword and then finish you off with ice. Do you have the Experience Points needed to cover both Cut Resistance and Water Resistance, Sage!?”

“!?”

The Sage’s eyebrows moved slightly at that.

It may have been possible for her to squeeze out enough Experience Points. She might have been able to reach 100% for Impact Resistance, Fire Resistance, Cut Resistance, and Water Resistance.

But she should have realized something else.

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau specialized in her absolute zero attack which required Water Resistance, but she could also making cutting attacks. So the shape of the weapon could provide normal physical attacks without relying on the standard Elements.

And Beatrice had intentionally avoided mentioning a certain attack.

The Sage’s Elemental Defense was switched on and off as she announced them, so she could not automatically defend against an attack she was not aware of.

Now, what was the Shining Weapon the red Holy Swordswoman held?

Yes, the tip was flat as it was used for Magic, but it was still a rapier.

“…!! A piercing attack!?”

At first, no hint of concern appeared on the Sage's beautiful face.

But a fearless smile came to Beatrice's lips as she responded.

"No, Weasel's Cut."

This time.

This time, all emotion briefly vanished from the Sage's eyes.

Her mind went blank.

"The temperature difference in the air creates a pressure change which produces a vacuum blade tornado! It's the Wind Element!!"

There was one thing about Beatrice one must never forget.

That Holy Swordswoman had mastered 14,000 kinds of Fire Magic, but she could use those flames to make attacks in any Element and had even fought on equal footing with Boo Boo once.

"The Shining Weapons and Gates have always been terminals meant to manage the Experience Points earned by you humans. The data is manipulated from Earth and used here. So there is a way to use that."

When Sibyl explained that, Huldra gulped.

"It is true they have no effect until we cross between worlds. So what are you saying? The Sage is a completely different person who had the exact same Experience Points as Beatrice injected into her!?"

"This is not simply talking about techniques and knowledge. After all, the points represent all experiences. This goes beyond simply adjusting her equipment, so it probably would greatly change her

facial and skeletal structure.”

People’s appearances were changed by their daily experiences. A diet or physical training were obvious examples, but the amount one ate or drank, the amount of UV rays from the sun, and the amount of stress or sleep also had an effect.

“What is an individual? How do you define someone’s body, appearance, mind, or soul? There is no clear answer, but it is true that experience has a significant effect on them all. People’s inborn traits, their surrounding environment, and the path they walk are all used to hone themselves as they seek their endpoint. All while they take in and accept it all as experiences: good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable. You could view the manipulation of Experience Points as intentionally moving to a different set of rails and removing all random chance from the changes made to you. It means to develop yourself just like choosing a path along the tree diagram of Magic. That flexibility goes well beyond what you call selective breeding or gene manipulation, as those can only influence inborn talent.”

It was just like the preset examples for Character Creation. It was like choosing the Job, equipment, and Magic recommended by a guidebook or website. Injecting yourself with all of Beatrice’s Experience Points was exactly the same as following the path she took and learning all of her idiosyncrasies and traits while Leveling Up from the beginning.

“It is the same as great pressure creating jewels underground. Of course, not everyone can become her. It may have been rare to find a specimen with such a perfect aptitude for the Beatrice Model to be flawlessly remade into her both inside and out. …And that must be what allowed her to accomplish that irregular reallocation.”

“You make it sound like the queen bee and worker bees that divided by the queen substance and the royal jelly. Why the

obsession with Beatrice?”

Gruagach sounded nearly speechless.

Sibyl sighed.

“She is one of humanity’s strongest, one of the representative level cappers. In other words, she was a success model. The Sage was originally a Kudryavka for 4th-dimensional travel, so they probably wanted someone with a powerful body and clever mind who could withstand a great change to her environment. If the decision had gone slightly differently, they may have chosen the Filinion Model or the Armelina Model.”

“Huh? But does that mean the Sage only looks just like Beatrice while in Ground’s Nir? Does she become someone else entirely when she returns to Earth?”

“I have no way of seeing things on Earth, so I can’t really say. But if so, I doubt she would have felt like she lost everything.”

“You mean…?”

“Just as there is a wall between Ground’s Nir and Earth, there is a wall between the future and the past. If her appearance is adjusted when she crosses that barrier, she will still be someone who has ‘breached the impassable barrier’ whether on Earth or Ground’s Nir, so I suppose she would remain as the Beatrice Model.”

Sibyl took a slow breath and shook her head.

“The Sage always spent an excessive amount of time in Ground’s Nir. I don’t know how many safe houses she has on Earth, but she had to have spent most of her time here in Ground’s Nir. I think she returned for the bare minimum required to recover her internal clock and such. It really didn’t seem like she was looking for a place for herself on Earth.”

The transfer of Experience Points.

As long as they found a way to do that, the population would not increase.

Even if they sent 7 or 8 billion people into the past, the food supply and resources would not dry up. As long as there was no extreme difference between the two populations, the one-way immigration would be a success. As long as you had a clump of carbon to receive the great pressure, you could make a jewel. They only had to remake their bodies, inside and out, into someone else so perfectly that their parents could not tell them apart. They had to accept that it was the people who would be devoured. And as long as they were aware that the future would be destroyed, they need not fear any time paradoxes.

But…

“Then who is the person who became a special bee?”

“That would be the Sage. The Beatrice Model Sage.”

“No, not that. Who was she before being remade by the Experience Points!?”

“It’s because she doesn’t know that that she has no choice but to cling to her position as the Sage, as the powerful Beatrice Model.”

It was unclear if the current Sage was primarily the Experience Points from the future or the specimen in the past, but she was still the Kudryavka for a 4th-dimensional travel experiment and had traveled to the past ahead of everyone else. But before the benefits of that experiment could be shared with the future human race, she had cut all ties and stopped the mass immigration. There was no way to know what had happened in the future, but with their 4th-dimensional escape route gone, they had likely been destroyed.

Why had she gone that far?

The answer to that could be found here.

“4th-dimensional travel via Experience Points was hailed as a new freedom that used every human being in the corresponding time period as a resource. To put it another way, it allowed them to destroy the human race at some point in the past in order to save themselves. The Sage cut all ties in order to protect everyone from that method. As a result, the modern Kudryavka was not caught in the future destruction and found herself trapped in a cage fare more lonely than outer space.”

They worked together perfectly.

Boo Boo, Armelina, and Wildefrau launched their strongest attacks and Beatrice caught the Sage completely off guard by using fire as a starting point to use Magic of a different Element.

The Sage had not expected the attack at all.

Weasel’s Cut enveloped the target in a tornado created from vacuum blades.

A dreadful roar seemed to compress space and several jewel-like drops of red flew through the air.

The Sage’s beautiful skin had been so untouchable, but now it was marred by countless small cuts. And it decorated the air with beautiful blood drops.

The Sage had not covered all forms of attack and defense from the beginning. She had rearranged her Experience Points to match the situation and freely reset her tree diagram of Magic to produce attack and defense of whichever Element she needed. If the amount was set, then there was a limit to what she could respond

to.

Boo Boo and the others still did not know how she had managed something as ridiculous as rearranging her Experience Points.

But they still got an attack in. They had proven that she was not an absolute existence. She had to observe her enemy to predict their Element and then manually select her Resistance, so there were countless ways to fool her.

There were about 32 ways this could play out from here.

Now that she was actually injured, the Sage would definitely have to increase her Wind Resistance. If she did not fill in that weakness, she would be bisected. But if they knew she was going to defend against that, they only had to use a different Element.

They got ahead of her.

They surpassed her.

The Sage had always continued forward no matter what happened. But Beatrice's group had stepped out ahead of her!!

"Oh."

For the first time.

For the very first time in this battle, a look of true desperation appeared on the Sage's face.

"Ohhhh

remained oddly empty. The fingers of the gauntlet burst. From the back of the hand to the fingertips, it transformed into 5 translucent red blades that seemed to be made of glass. They jutted out far narrower and longer than the rapier.

Lorelei gave one the strongest power.

What had ever happened with that?

“But no matter what might happen, I am the last of the Royal Elves. I was certainly surprised when someone approached and immediately said I seemed nostalgic. Even after she explained her situation, there was only so much I could do.”

Sibyl narrowed her eyes and sounded like she was recalling a distant memory.

“My Skill materializes residual memories. I could not reproduce the techniques of the destroyed Iberian Orcs, but I was able to bring back a few valuable documents.”

Yes.

For example…

“The wall painting depicting the secret method of fully controlling Lorelei.”

The final attack moved beyond the Sage’s own ability to reallocate her Experience Points. That was why it smashed the assumption that she could not counterattack when forcibly bringing multiple Elemental Defenses up to 100%. Lorelei itself was supposedly a Break News that easily granted its wielder their image of the strongest. It was plain as day what flaw the Sage would think

needed fixing.

“Melt Cutting!!”

“Cold Edge!!”

Multiple magic circles shined and blades cut at her from the left and right simultaneously, but the Sage did not move. Simply by standing in place, she deflected the Shining Weapons of the Holy Swordswoman and Ice Waterfall Princess.

“Full defense for all Elements.”

“…”

That alone was frightening. An Elemental Defense required massive amounts of Experience Points as it approached 100% as a quadratic curve, so maxing out every Element was insane.

But she did not stop there.

Lorelei’s violence went much further.

“Equals unlimited automatic Experience Point acquisition.”

“…!!!??? You don’t have to fight or explore the Labyrinth? Just by holding it, it gives you an inexhaustible supply of Experience Points!?”

In a way, that may have been an item anyone would covet.

And if she would automatically receive more Experience Points than she could ever use, she could bring every single Elemental Defense up to 100%. Not only that, she could also reach every single attack Magic on the Magic tree diagram. She could have it all without bothering to reallocate anything.

The Sage had filled in her gaps.

A counterattack of overwhelming destruction was finally beginning.

And if an attack with another Element could not slip through any longer, Boo Boo and Armelina's lives would be snuffed out as they made their physical attacks from right in front of her. They knew that, but there was nothing more they could do.

Things were already on the move. The scales were tilting toward defeat.

But just before that happened, bewitching laughter slipped into their ears.

"Everyone, aren't you forgetting someone?"

A voice followed.

It came from Boo Boo's side. Until now, 'Anatomia Puzzle' Filinion had been nothing but a burden in glasses, but now she threw some colorful test tubes toward the Sage.

She was only a healer, the cornerstone of support that could not cause any direct damage.

But that was not necessarily true.

The Sage had announced that she would take no damage from Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, or any kind of physical attack. The same was likely true for Status Effects such as poison and paralysis.

But that was exactly the point.

"There is no real reason to negate healing."

"?"

"So no matter what Elemental Defense you have, you can't negate healing."

There was a splashing sound.

The Sage had merely watched the colorful test tubes because she had assumed the glasses girl was only throwing them away, but it was too late to stare in shock now.

Beatrice knew what it was.

That potion had healed her back tooth without altering her sensitive face in the slightest.

But…

“Take this: a reconstructive healing potion that heals all wounds!! But in exchange, it saps the Willpower you need to use Magic!!”

“Wha-…?”

What would happen if she was hit with more and more of those special recovery potions that came at a great cost?

Nothing more was necessary.

No matter how many Experience Points she built up and how much Magic she learned, Magic was Magic.

Magic had to consume Willpower to be released into the world.

That was true of the Command-style that produced fire or ice from a Shining Weapon and of the Percentage-type that took the form of clothing to change one’s Parameters or increase one’s Elemental Defenses.

“You can no longer use Magic.”

So what would happen if all of that Willpower was taken away?

What would happen now that she was out of gas and the breaker had been thrown?

Even the invisible Elemental Defenses were subconscious Magic. They would no longer function once the Willpower at the foundation was stripped away.

…Lorelei would easily grant its wielder their idea of the strongest, but it would take advantage of the weaknesses.

That blade had become a legend of its own, so was it now swallowing up its own creator?

“It’s time you were defeated, Sage! As no more than a normal person!!”

Finally. Truly finally, a magic circle exploded from Beatrice’s back now that everyone had passed her the baton. Her rapier roared through the air, flames blazed out along its path, and it scored a direct hit on the Sage’s stomach.

With a great din, the Sage was blown away.

This faceless person had adjusted their clothing Magic and rearranged their Experience Points to maintain the illusion that they were Beatrice. Beatrice’s eyes met that person’s for just a moment.

The Sage reached out her Lorelei-transformed right hand as if trying to grab something.

Was she trying to reach Beatrice? Or Boo Boo?

Long silver and red hair flew, spread out, and revealed the skin a bit behind the left ear.

There was no mole there.

They had concluded that she had hastily added it unnecessarily when Boo Boo had made his false claim.

But wasn’t there another way to look at it, even if it felt like

overthinking things?

What if the real Beatrice had learned to transform at some point? If she had never had the mole but hastily added it after Boo Boo's false claim, did that really prove anything at all?

It all remained foggy.

It was like searching for the top and bottom side of a Moebius strip.

Before any answer could be found, the Sage slammed into the layered wall of the shaft and then fell. Boo Boo and Beatrice both ran over, but they did not arrive in time. Their outstretched hands felt nothing in their grasp and the Sage simply fell. She slipped through the gap between the large elevator floor and the shaft wall and then she vanished into the seemingly bottomless darkness below.

Part 13

No one moved for a while.

The only sound was that of the large gears moving.

"Is it…over?"

Beatrice eventually spoke.

She had made the final attack, but it did not seem real even to her.

That barrier had been far too great.

But they had crossed it. Beatrice, Filinion, Armelina, Wildefrau, and Boo Boo. They were all there. None of them was lost.

“It’s over. It’s really over…”

“Actually, let me see your injuries, Boo Boo! You’re all sliced up!”

“Squeal. I’m fine if everyone else is.”

“That isn’t what she was asking. It’s free, so let Filinion heal you.”

They began arguing like normal, but Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau looked around and then straight up.

“Umm, how do we stop this elevator?”

“Huhh!?”

Beatrice sounded flustered.

The White Witch also froze in place after pulling out a colorful test tube.

“Wh-what happens if we can’t stop it!? U-um! We can just hit a button or pull a lever once we reach the bottom, right!? Please don’t tell me it’s a one-way trip and we have to fight our way back up from the very bottom of the Labyrinth!”

“Wildefrau, can you freeze the elevator’s gears with your absolute zero vacuum!?””

“Well, I could, but any unnecessary force on the frozen parts would probably cause them to shatter.”

“Umm, meaning…?”

“I don’t know what kind of safety features this thing has, but we might just fall straight down. And even if it worked, we’d still be stuck who knows how many hundreds or thousands of meters belowground. Oh, but the Labyrinth is connected through subspace in some parts, isn’t it?”

“E-e-eeek!?”

As usual, the White Witch grew pale and shrieked.

Beatrice rubbed her slender chin.

“If possible, we could use emergency escape Magic.”

“After fighting Sibyl and then the Sage? Who here can use Magic that’s that much of a drain on your Willpower?”

“More importantly…”

Wildefrau remained surprisingly cool-headed throughout.

She may have been the kind of person that kept her distance and thus did not allow a panic to spread to her.

“The Sage had built up such insane power to fight that Ground’s Nir monster, right? Isn’t that why she was using Lorelei to obtain full coverage for all Elements? If we defeat that final trump card but don’t do anything about the monster…um, won’t we be neglecting something rather important?”

“Wait. Hold on.”

Armelina pressed her index fingers together in front of her flaaat chest while hoping against hope that she was wrong.

The arrangement of frames and lines made from fire illusion Magic was not complete.

It was not over with just the Sage.

“D-do we have to continue right on to the giant Magic kaiju battle with that monster!? We’re all beaten up from the Sage and haven’t recovered at all! Moving straight from the Sibyl battle to the Sage battle was bad enough, but we have to go for 3 in a row!!!???”

That said, this position was unfilled now that the Sage had been defeated. Someone else would have to fill it. If that monster reached the surface, all life living on Ground's Nir would be wiped out and devastating chaos would reach Earth once the economic support of Magic and Pieces was lost.

Someone had to do it.

…And if whoever it was had to take over for the Sage, they would naturally have to be someone who had proven they were more powerful than her.

Between the Lines 2

My stance has gotten a lot better?

What are you talking about? I still haven't beaten you.

How is it I can't beat someone who uses no Magic and just swings around a blunt weapon? I, well, use a bit of a trick, but I can access almost any Magic usable by humans.

Why is that a problem? The biggest problem is that I can't hold it against you even as I keep losing.

In the end, all of the distortions may be focused here.

I was supposed to win, win, and win some more in order to save 7 or 8 billion people, but that's exactly why nothing remains for me. To be honest, I might have fallen into despair in a world that didn't teach me how to lose.

I was glad.

I was glad to find there was someone I couldn't stand up to, a barrier I couldn't cross.

I guess it taught me that the world is a sturdier thing than I thought and that I can't just go on a wild rampage. It's weird, but you looked like a strong lifeline to me. I finally found a thick, thick lifeline that I could entrust my full body weight to.

Hey, elder. I'm grateful.

It's kind of embarrassing saying it out loud.

So you said you had something important to tell me. What is it? Ha ha. Don't look so reluctant. I'm indebted to you. You really did save my life, so I'm willing to do anything that could help you.

Ksh.

…Ksshh, kssshhh…

Kssssssshhhhhhh!!

(Notice / Conversation log partially missing. File is unplayable.)

Chapter 3: Boss_Quest 03 "Launch_Sequence" Grade: Unscorable

Part 1

(Central Shaft)

Sleep! It’s time to sleep!!

When fighting consecutive battles, the Willpower which powered Magic was most important. If they could not avoid a fight with this monster, they needed to recover as much as possible first.

They did not have their pajamas with them now.

“Well, I’m fine as long as I strip naked.”

“Okay, everyone. Let’s pull out that nightcap and stop that pervert!!!!!!”

To make a long story short, some teenage girls slept directly on the floor of the giant elevator. But…

“Uuh… I can’t sleep with the grinding of the gears… And they’re making the floor vibrate…”

“Just get to sleep. Even 5 or 10 minutes will recover some Willpower and we never know what will determine life or death. We all know this isn’t as nice as an inn, so quit complaining!”

Armelina handed out some chocolate and biscuits she had as

emergency rations, but that may have been to help them get to sleep even a little sooner. At this point, not even the bare minimum of virtues (not eating before going to sleep) could be found.

Beatrice used her fire illusion Magic to display a frame.

“Eh heh heh. Good night, Boo Boo.”

“…Um, Beatrice?”

“What is it, Wildefrau? I’m going through the final ritual used when I just can’t seem to sleep. Look how cute Boo Boo was back then☆ I’m so glad I took a Screenshot.”

“B-but should you really be losing yourself in memories when the real Boo Boo is right there…?”

The Iberian Orc himself only tilted his head and squealed, so it may not have been that big an issue.

Meanwhile, Filinion unwrapped one of the chocolates the Fighter Priest was distributing.

“But scheduling it out like this only makes it harder to sleep. It’s not like you can plan to go to sleep in precisely an hour and then do so.”

“You don’t get to complain when you’re keeping us up with that aroma candle, you cowww!!”

They were technically in the Labyrinth, but this shaft did not connect to the other passageways and there were none of the Gimmicks that copied the structures of living creatures or the Traps embedded in the walls or floor. And it was true they were exhausted after fighting Sibyl and the Sage back to back. They complained a lot at first, but they eventually quieted down.

There may have been a pajama boom underway, but they had

always taken naps in the Labyrinth by establishing a small barrier in place of a sleeping bag, placing a single blanket over the hard stone, and sleeping on top of that. You did not reach the level cap without the ability to endure some discomfort.

However…

“Squeal…”

At some point, Boo Boo started dozing off even though he did not have to worry about Magic or Willpower. He may have simply been bored without anyone to talk to. This proved to be a problem.

“Zzz. Mutter, mutter. Bgohh…zgohhhhh.”

“Uh, oh…”

“Bgohhh!! Bgooooooogh!! …Mutter, mutter. The superb flavor has plunged the judge into a sea of sashimiiiii!! Bgoghhh!!”

“Byaaaahh!! B-B-Boo Boo… What is this bombardment for!?”

“Cow, complain if you like, but Boo Boo’s tossing and turning is worse than his snor-…”

Before Beatrice could finish her warning, the gray pig-faced giant rolled over. The tearfully complaining glasses girl uttered a strange “Bglh!?” and fell silent. She seemed to have lost consciousness, but it was a mystery if she would recover any Willpower in the meantime.

Wildefrau grew pale and shot to her feet.

“Wh-wh-wh-what do we do about this!? This is just as dangerous as one of those traps with a boulder rolling down a slope! Really, what do we do!?”

“Mutter, mutter…zzzzz!! …And now for some dessert! The expert’s

plan for a comeback was hidden in the dessert, not the main diiiiish!! Bubah, bubah!!”

It was unclear what kind of dream had him so excited, but Boo Boo moved some more.

A thick tongue stuck out from his mouth which was far larger than it seemed.

“Ah.”

With Filinion squashed, Beatrice was closest to him.

And not even the strongest Holy Swordswoman had time to prepare herself.

It happened in a single strike.

He mimicked licking something and, with a horribly wet sound, she was covered in saliva from below her hips to above her chest.

“Hyahhhhn!?”

His tongue moved from below her navel to her breastplate and even higher. When she heard the strained, high-pitched noise she uttered on reflex, Beatrice felt a blush spread out to her ears.

Wildefrau also blushed and shouted at the Holy Swordswoman trembling next to her.

“Don’t make such lewd sounds!”

“N-no…!! Wh-what!? That voice…what is happening to my body!?”

“Don’t worry, Beatrice. You shut one eye and turned your face the other way, so he just barely missed your lips. It doesn’t count as your first kiss. Your cheek and hair are certainly a mess, though.”

“Eh? You mean I’m a girl who had her entire body licked before her

first kiss!?”

Armelina’s calm comment led Beatrice to feel like she had gotten the order of things in her life completely out of whack, but a look at her Shining Weapon showed her Experience Points had indeed gone up slightly.

“Kh…!! This is supposed to be when the pointlessly plump glasses cow comes in handy, but she’s so slow she got herself crushed right away!”

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t cause a supernova if anyone but you had something happen with Boo Boo.”

And this was not the time to be stubborn.

Boo Boo was fast asleep, but his gigantic tongue was still sticking out as he rolled around.

The Fighter Priest made up her mind immediately. Her survival instincts had been honed in the severe Labyrinth, and they told her exactly what to do.

“Special Technique☆Beatrice Barrier!!”

“Wait! Armelina!?”

“Shut up. As I said, if any of us gets hit by Boo Boo, it’ll trigger that jealousy explosion of yours. I’m not about to let disaster strike me twice. And that means you just need to look after him on your own!!”

It all sounded like a joke, but Armelina was serious as she circled behind the red Holy Swordswoman with a smile. She used all of the arm strength built up for physical attacks to hold Beatrice’s slender shoulders and not let go.

“H-how can you people betray each other so readily right before a

major battle!?”

Wildefrau protested, but the police officer looked aside with a cold sweat pouring from her face.

“Sorry, Ice Waterfall Princess. But I swore to myself I would remain a pure maiden in this world at least.”

“I feel like you’ve rewritten the definition of maiden for yourself…”

But just as she made that super cool-headed comment…

“Bhyoo boo, bhyoo, boboo… Bgoh, zgohhhhhh! Delicious!! It’s so delicious!! But there was alcohol mixed in!! Boboo!!”

With an incredibly threatening aura, a giant, thick, and heavy object passed by Wildefrau. It was the extra-large sticky tongue protruding from Boo Boo’s mouth.

“……
……
……”

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau thought for a while with a smile frozen on her sweaty face.

And…

“Ah, wait, no!? Wildefrau, you’re our last voice of reason, so don’t you hide behind me too! Bbraaw! Wah! Waaaahhh!?”

Unable to dodge the tongue that rushed in on its way back, Beatrice let out an extended cry like a fighting game character’s defeat yell and she collapsed on the spot.

The other 2 began to tremble with their greatest shield gone.

“Ah, ah wah, ah wah wah wah wah wah…”

“H-hey. Beatrice stomped right up to the Crystal Bridge Guild Battle where it was said 3 million Magic attacks were being exchanged and she conquered it all on her own! If she’s gone pale, this must do more damage than the entire human race can hope to bear!”

The survivors, Armelina and Wildefrau, wanted to avoid being crushed to death or licked all over. The cries of the people who had met those fates were still fresh in their memories!!

And this was not a case of one precluding the other. They could see the tongue licking across unconscious Filinion from her stomach to below her chest. The attack never let up.

“Oh, no! He’s rolling this way! Run! Run away!!”

“Armelina, I’m guessing this is your fault for handing out those snacks. The sweet smell is guiding Boo Boo in his dream. …Hee hee☆”

“Wildefrauuuu!!”

Part 2

(The Factory)

In the end, only Boo Boo felt refreshed.

An extra heavy shaking of the elevator woke him.

He blinked and spoke.

“Oh, I’m drooling. Rub, rub… Huh? What? Are we there already???”

“Y-yeah… Prepare yourself, Boo Boo. We really are going to be relying on you…”

Beatrice, Filinion, Armelina, and Wildefrau looked a lot stickier and weary than when he had last seen them, but if they were relying on him, he would have to do this best. After all, he was full of energy!!

The elevator had stopped.

They had arrived at the very bottom of the Labyrinth.

Beatrice looked around.

“I don’t see the Sage anywhere.”

“Well, I would feel a little bad if we crushed her below the elevator…but then where did she get off to?”

Filinion sounded hesitant, but a simple search was unlikely to find her.

Was it really possible to reach this place on foot? The long, narrow corridor did have a large stairway leading up in addition to the elevator, but it was unknown if anyone could reach it under their own power. The lights lining the walls at even intervals looked like collections of fireflies and Boo Boo’s group naturally followed them.

They finally found a large room.

It only contained a round door much like the entrance to a bank vault. And it was quite large. Its diameter was larger than a school classroom. Thick metal rods were attached around the perimeter to lock it in place. There were dozens…no, hundreds of them all told. Not even Beatrice was confident she could force it open with pure firepower.

“Gulp.”

Boo Boo gulped and touched the round door.

And something odd happened.

The impregnable door suddenly spun around. As it repeatedly rotated to the right and left according to some kind of rules, sharp cracks entered the entire thick wall. No, that was not accurate. What had looked like a bank vault door was actually a dial given that shape and size. The seemingly never-ending wall was the sealing door.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Then someone must be doing something on the inside. Be careful, Boo Boo!”

Yes, if the Labyrinth was an automatic factory meant to create the ultimate weapon, then that was what must be waiting at the deepest point. And its emergence was not necessarily a good thing. What if that door was meant to prevent its escape and not just keep intruders out? The door’s opening would not necessarily lead to anything good.

Because this might mean the monster had finished analyzing the structure of the lock and was crawling out.

“It’s waiting,” said Boo Boo.” The Ground’s Nir monster is waiting up ahead.”

It opened.

The final door opened.

And what waited for them there?

A dark and muscular king of beasts looking down at them from a giant throne.

“…!!!???”

“Wait, Beatrice. It isn’t moving.”

Beatrice’s heart leaped in her chest and she reached for her rapier, but Boo Boo calmly stopped her.

Sure enough, a closer inspection showed that the outline in the darkness was only giant statue taking that demonic form. That demon king and the throne it sat in were both fake. And cables were connected to them.

Out of habit, Beatrice called up her fire illusion Magic frames and lines, but then her thoughts ground to a halt.

“Hold on. Cables???”

She questioned it anew.

And once she knew it was fake, she could divert her focus from the overpowering presence.

What they saw there was almost enough to send all their preconceived notions crashing down.

“What…?”

Every wall of the vast space was covered in countless flat-screen monitors of varying sizes. Cables crawled along the floor and oppressively large boxy masses hung down from the unseen ceiling. Those devices that hung down like stalactites were probably some kind of processor.

Everything was hard, cold, and out of place.

None of it should exist in Ground’s Nir, a world of swords and sorcery.

Beatrice felt an intense sense of revulsion in the back of her mind. She felt like observing anything in here would break some kind of taboo. It was a wild collection of hopelessly broken rules. The space was filled with blasphemy.

Filinion gulped and viewed the monitors.

“Are these…the plans for Gimmicks? It looks like this covers everything from the weakest annoyances to the Punishment types that cause instant death if you encounter them.”

“And this is…a map of the current Labyrinth? No, it has a ton of weird arrows on it. Is it simulating how it’ll be distorted next!?”

The encyclopedia and map-obsessed girls both voiced their surprise and Wildefrau focused on the data from a different angle.

“That isn’t all. It seems to be monitoring the movement patterns of the intruders. In other words, the actions of us humans.”

“It can’t be…”

Beatrice created more and more frames and connected them with all sorts of lines. She was supposed to be organizing her information, but she was only growing more confused.

She was inundated by information.

Come to think of it, the Iberian Orcs had feared the monster’s completion and were prepared to fight as a village to stop it, but hadn’t the delinquent soldiers of Elkiad mentioned that the Iberian Orcs had not liked that the humans were visiting the Labyrinth?

And the Nonhumans living on Ground’s Nir’s surface had somehow known that approaching the Labyrinth was a bad idea.

Could it be?

“Was it using the entire Labyrinth…to determine what the strongest being is? Was it using combat to decide what physical structure and thought processes are strongest…?”

The Gimmicks wandering the Labyrinth had used clockwork designs to mimic the structures of plants and animals. Those were likely samples that had been fully analyzed and artificially recreated. Then those existing samples were pitted against the unknown intruders to gather more data.

Almost like the experiments in the evolution of artificial life using computers.

The Labyrinth had remade itself into harsh environments to see how long the life forms inside it could survive. Perhaps the Iberian Orcs had opposed entering the Labyrinth in order to delay the test schedule and interfere with the work to design the ultimate weapon that slept in the greatest depths.

In that case, what had the Labyrinth ultimately decided was the “strongest lifeform”?

A low mechanical rumbling reached their ears.

Beatrice looked over to the source of the noise and saw the giant demon king statue wriggling in its throne at the center of the space surrounded by monitors. The movement came from the core where all of the cords and cables gathered.

It opened.

A vertical crack ran down the center and it opened like a double-door iron maiden.

And inside was…

A girl.

A slender, lovely, and delicate human girl.

…In a way, this was the obvious result.

Once Beatrice reached the same answer with her many frames and lines, she could not stop the chill running down her back.

Which lifeform had most often entered the Labyrinth, defeated the most Gimmicks, overcome the most Traps, and reached the deepest floor? If that was defined as the strongest form, what would the automatic factory base its ultimate weapon on?

It was obvious: humans.

“Connection to fully-powered body confirmed. Internal power and signal sync confirmed. All green.”

There was a voice.

A feminine-sounding artificial voice gently filled the space.

“Acceptable results were successfully reached using the results of 130 million simulated logic tests. As per the given task, the final physical test within the Labyrinth shall begin. Once complete, execution of Priority 1 may begin.”

Her hair shined silver like it was coated with metal in places and two strands dangled down on her shoulders.

Based on her height and the outlines of her body, she was probably meant to be younger than Beatrice.

Instead of any kind of armor, she wore what looked like a black one piece swimsuit with a large hole in the stomach. Identically colored fabric was wrapped around her arms and legs.

She had solid pointed ears, but they were different from an Elf’s.

The girl had her eyes calmly closed as she swam in the mysterious liquid contain within a giant clear water tank positioned like the demon king statue's womb.

"Not good…"

That was ruin.

That waking ruin would spread the concepts of death and destruction across the world once she opened her eyes.

"Not good!!!!!!"

"Ground's Nir – Abyss. Beginning final physical test."

It was like a sharp blade slicing through a thin membrane.

Something seemed to turn red.

And once the closed eyes opened wide, they encountered the end.

Part 3

(The Factory)

"Kah…"

What…

What had happened?

"…Huh?"

For a while, Beatrice did not understand. By the time she had heard a thick glass container breaking and a viscous liquid bursting out, a

terrible impact had passed through her entire body and slammed her into the giant monitors on the wall.

She could just barely move her eyes enough to see that Filinion, Armelina, Wildefrau, and Boo Boo were in a similar state. They lay against the wall or on the floor, like a powerful storm had blown through.

And Abyss was nowhere to be seen.

She had already left the deepest area.

Only the feminine artificial voice continued.

“Physical activation of Abyss confirmed. This armory’s purpose is complete, so commencing ordered shutdown of operations. Diverting all excess energy to Abyss. Primarily retaining monitoring functionality until full shutdown upon completion of test. All energy and materials will be sent to the completed Abyss.”

“Dammit…this isn’t good…”

She still had trouble breathing after her back slammed into the wall, but she had to get moving. Beatrice unsteadily pulled herself from the nonfunctioning monitor and once more stood on her own two feet within the Labyrinth.

“Boo Boo, everyone! Stand up! The monster…Abyss has been released. We’ll lose everything if she follows the Labyrinth to the surface!! So we have to stop her!!”

“Monitoring energy across all of Ground’s Nir: 58%, 57%, 56%…”

That countdown reaching 0% sounded like a bad thing.

Would the surface be sucked dry of all forms of energy to destroy the food chain from the bottom up? Or would the island itself collapse? Either way, the greatest fear of the Iberian Orcs and the

Sage was going to happen. It was not going to stop by pure coincidence. If they did nothing, ruin was inevitable. Only after Beatrice worked with all her strength would they “happen across” a “coincidental” chance of derailing that ruin.

“I-is there really any way of defeating that…? Cough.”

“We just have to keep her from reaching the surface, right!? Still, we need to get going!!”

They all slowly stood up and resumed moving.

They were up against an incarnation of violence who was powerful enough to brush aside 4 level cappers and an Iberian Orc. If they hoped to stop her, they could not repeat that foolishness.

“That said, the Labyrinth is a big place. We can’t let ourselves get lost either. Filinion!”

“Okay! Fine, then!”

She threw a colorful test tube to the floor which began to glow like someone had applied glow-in-the-dark paint. The light marked Abyss’s footprints. The mysterious liquid in the beaker seemed to react to it.

“This is the Hansel and Gretel method. Follow the bread crumbs and we can reach our target. Kyah!?”

They could not afford any more lost time.

Boo Boo once more held the unathletic White Witch under his arm and they all quickly left the factory area.

“She didn’t use the central shaft! The green footprints lead to the big staircase!”

“You mean she avoided the shortest course…?”

Why was unclear, but Beatrice's group needed to catch up to Abyss as quickly as possible. Whatever route she had taken, they had to follow it.

"Boo. Is this…?"

"Boo Boo?"

Beatrice's question went unanswered because he was lost in thought. Regardless, they had to find Abyss. They ran up the stairs to reach the next floor up.

Part 4

(On Ground's Nir)

It was a moonlit night.

"Hmm, things sure are boring with Boo Boo gone."

Fairy Queen Sutriona had been influenced by the human fad, so she was pacing the brick house in the mountains while wearing nothing but a button-up shirt as sexy pajamas.

"Zzz…"

Snores could be heard from the Fairy Queen's shoulder. Elder Morgan was sleeping there while wearing bagworm pajamas made from flower petals tied together with Ground Spider silk. She was tied on tight, so she would not fall from Sutriona's shoulder no matter how much she moved. The elder had been Sutriona's conversation partner for a while, but the Break News was alone now.

(Maybe I should stop being so nocturnal.)

Looking a little lonely, Sutriona walked to the small garden next to the house.

“Hey, perverted carrot. You’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

“I have.”

A beautiful woman with brown skin and long hair was buried in the softly tilled soil to just below her chest. She was Ileana, the greatest of the Mandragoras. She wore something like a flower bud lampshade. The thin film covered her entire body like a poncho. She had mistaken the pursuit of entertainment and luxury for proof of intelligence and rationality. She may have thought it was the same as the human pajamas, but that did not make it any less see-through.

“I keep feeling this odd sensation like an invisible hand is grabbing and shaking the core of my body.”

“Good,” said Sutriona. “That means I’m not imagining it.”

With the low rumbling of air, a giant silhouette passed by overhead, obscuring the moon. That was the Thousand Dragon a flying dragon measuring 1000 meters long who created great quantities of clouds just by flying by.

Sutriona put her hands on her hips, sighed, and struck a bold pose despite only wearing a button-up shirt.

“Big or small, it would seem all of the Break News are on the move. I’ve heard our strength is used against our will to power the largescale Traps in the Labyrinth, so perhaps something strange is occurring there.”

“Even so, why not leave this to the reckless humans who choose to visit that Labyrinth?” Ileana turned her head around with half her

body still buried in the soil. “That over there would be the bigger problem for us.”

They heard something like a seductive feminine laugh.

And that was not entirely inaccurate.

But it was the middle of the night and well outside the human inn town, so it was an odd thing to hear from the dense forest.

“I said big or small, didn’t I? The one’s that were more affected have gone crazy like that. And they still have their power as a Break News.”

“Hee hee hee. Eh heh heh. Tee hee. Eh heh heh heh heh heh.”

It was oddly calm overall, but it contained an irregular wave that filled the listener’s heart with unease. And it slowly approached. A broken silhouette could be glimpsed between the trees.

They were finally revealed to be a young woman in a monocle who had gorgeous jewels decorating her entire body.

Her wavy bluish-purple hair reached her feet and her skin was more blue than white. She seemed to absorb the night air and glowed with a pale light. She wore jewels across her naked body… no, there were enough of them that she seemed to be dragging them with her. She belonged to the species that the inn town’s humans referred to as the Treasure Goddesses.

No, it only looked that way.

Gullveig was camouflaged as the incarnation of a treasure monster, but the supposed jewels covering her body were actually univalve shellfish from the beach. In other words, they were colorful parasites. People were drawn in by the goddess’s nudity and the glow of the jewels, but once they were within the lethal range, the hundreds or thousands of lights would launch from her body and

devour her poor, foolish prey. She was that sort of Break News.

“Heh heh. Eh heh heh. Ah hah hah. Eh heh hah hah hah hah hah…”

“Hey, pest,” said Ileana. “Isn’t her head pretty empty even without the Labyrinth affecting her?”

“Dammit. The one problem with all the Break News is how they’re all such perverts.”

However, that was not the only rustling sound.

Sutriona turned around fast enough for the bottom of her button-up shirt to flutter dangerously high.

“Flame Bubble, the goo lifeform that creates countless bubble bombs, and Frau Gothel, the statue of a beautiful girl with no known sculptor. What a pain. None of them are the kind you could talk with in the first place. It just makes this so much more complicated!”

“If they’re evil to the core, can’t we just kick their asses whether they were driven mad or not?”

It was true that the Break News were crawling all across the small island due to the change in the Labyrinth.

If they were intoxicated and began thrash their limbs around wildly, it would cause unimaginable damage. The village of Fairies who revered Sutriona and the human inn town she enjoyed visiting might both vanish into the mist.

“So does that mean you’re willing to help out, perverted carrot?”

“Hmph. I resent having to join forces with you, but this is shellfish, fire, and stone. The dirt too is a living thing. It breathes and drinks. I would hate to see such a nice garden be destroyed.”

Ileana sounded exasperated as she pulled herself from the ground.

And there was one legend concerning Mandragoras that everyone knew.

If they were carelessly uprooted, they would scream and steal the soul of all who heard it.

Immediately, Ileana fired a deadly soundwave spear from her mouth to signal the beginning of the battle.

Part 5

(??? / No records, area unnamed as no humans have ever arrived here)

After running up the large staircase, the walls, floor, and ceiling were divided into blocks to form what looked like thick transparent water tanks. They were filled with giant, dark red organs. None of them protruded from the tanks and none of the sticky liquid dripped down, but it was still far from a pleasant sight.

“Urp. What is this place…?”

“Abyss matters more than exploring this area. We can still see her footprints!”

They were trying to catch up, so they could not afford to lose time dealing with Gimmicks and Traps. Beatrice and the others carefully searched for enemies, fled to a different path when they caught sight of one, and avoided battle as they followed the footprints.

Something like a giant boot stuck full of swords and spears hopped about.

There was what looked like the remains of a carnivorous dinosaur that continually self-destructed and regenerated because it could not maintain its form.

A rundown life-size French doll wandered around in search of parts.

“Wait, wait, wait. The instant death Punishment ones that show up when you stay in one place for an hour pale in comparison to this lineup. The enemies get this bad when you’re this deep?”

“They don’t even seem based on existing plants and animals anymore…”

“Boo. Wait, look over there!”

They spotted a familiar face in the previous plaza of internal organs.

It looked like a girl wearing a black one piece swimsuit with her stomach revealed by a large hole. She had badly-distressed silver hair with two strands hanging down over the shoulders.

“Abyss!”

But she would escape as things were.

Beatrice clenched her teeth and Wildefrau shouted to her.

“There’s an Alarm in the same plaza as her! Beatrice, attack it from a distance!!”

“Oh, I get it!”

A magic circle glowed on Beatrice’s back.

She used Metal Jet. An attack like an orange laser beam scorched the air and struck the Gimmick standing next to Abyss. It looked like a large alarm clock.

The Alarm of Calamity was not that powerful on its own, but it was well-known for its devious strategy of calling in all the surrounding Gimmicks with an ear-splitting din.

The retro noise was reminiscent of a fire alarm.

“Yes.”

As expected, Beatrice’s group was ignored and the many Gimmicks gathered around Abyss who was just about to leave the organ plaza. This was the same method used to kill a rival. They could not let their guard down since each of these Gimmicks was equivalent to the extraordinary Punishment variety, but stopping Abyss took priority.

However.

It was like scoring a strike in bowling.

With a pleasant noise, the exceptional Gimmicks were scattered across the floor.

Even from a distance, it was unclear what had happened.

They had just barely managed to see Abyss swing a hand horizontally, but the length of her arm and the range of the attack did not match.

And the fear did not end there.

She must have realized this was a purposeful trap and not just some bad luck. She slowly turned around and glared at them. At the same time, the observer spoke using an artificial voice coming from all of the walls.

“Deadly Sugar Boot, Food Destruction Fang, Eternal Doll, and Alarm of Calamity defeated. Battle complete. Abyss earned 98,000 Experience Points.”

“Wha-…?”

Odd mechanical noises followed.

At some point, a large metal wheel had appeared on Abyss’s back. It was attached to her shoulder blades by two supports and the exterior edge of the wheel seemed to extend to attach to the wreckage of the smashed Gimmicks. It grabbed them as if with 3 thick fingers. They were like crude arms structured like a standing lamp or like angel wings made from heavy weaponry. The red light on the outer edge of her ankles combined with the black fabric over her shapely legs looked something like a dolphin or orca’s tail. She was like a transcendent being that ruled over land, sea, and sky.

As a final touch, an entirely unfamiliar pattern appeared above her head.

It hovered above her silver hair like an angel’s halo, but it was…a magic circle???

With a static electric hum, the lines on her clothing filled with red and a red warning triangle appeared directly on her skin below her chest. Her metal ears opened up into the three pieces with red light spread between them like sails.

“Abyss has learned new Magic. Metal Jet: standby.”

“Oh, no! Take cover!!”

Like with a 3D printer, it may have been too much for the world once it gained physical form. Just as they all pressed against the floor or walls, several orange beams sliced through the air and filled the entire space like laser art. The thick water tanks were sliced through and the giant, dark red organs inside burst out.

Beatrice did not want to accept the truth before her eyes.

She hesitated to write this new information into her frames and

lines. But the horrific “truth” was attacking in real time.

“Abyss has learned new Magic. Rail Magnum, Big Bomb, Aero Gatling: standby.”

“Is she an unmanned weapon that learns Magic by defeating Gimmicks!?”

“Boo. Just like all of you.”

That outside perspective sent a chill down Beatrice’s spine. What if this was why Abyss had chosen to travel through the complex Labyrinth instead of using the direct central shaft? What would happen if that strongest weapon continually cannibalized the lower Gimmicks, stole their Experience Points, and limitlessly learned Magic?

Beatrice felt the fear of having a human privilege stolen by a machine.

It was the fear of being unable to catch up and forever losing their chance to switch her off if she passed a certain point.

“Anyway, stand up, Beatrice. We can’t just stay here.”

“R-right…!”

They avoided the organs spilling into the corridor and made their way to the plaza.

Abyss was already gone.

And they heard a deafening fire alarm from the next floor up.

Wildefrau spoke the worst possibility.

“…Curse her. Did she steal the Alarm of Calamity’s parts so she could gather the Gimmicks to herself!?”

Part 6

(??? / No records, area unnamed as no humans have ever arrived here)

Their surroundings changed once they climbed the stairs.

A red and black checkerboard floor was covered in cards and chips. What looked like a spinning merry-go-round was actually a roulette wheel. This floor seemed to have a casino motif.

As before, it was filled with never-before-seen Gimmicks, but they did not have time to cower in fear of them all.

“They’re already smashed and discarded. The cannibalization is complete…”

It felt like coming across the scene of a murder. An electric tension surrounded their bodies, but there was nothing left to move. They did not feel the more direct fear of knowing they could be stabbed in the gut at any time.

“I suppose it’s lucky these are unexplored areas where no one else will be…”

If she had gathered the powerful Gimmicks on the floor and defeated them all, just how many Experience Points had Abyss accumulated in her body?

“A-anyway.”

Beatrice tried to keep her thoughts moving before her fear pinned her in place.

“We need to catch up to Abyss. We know all too well that everything’s over if she reaches the surface.”

Just as they forced themselves to take the first step along the path of glowing footprints, they heard a creaking sound from overhead.

Beatrice looked up without thinking and there she saw it.

At some point, the monster named Abyss had approached them while clinging to the ceiling on all fours.

“Wha-…?”

“She’s already learned we were following her footprints and used it against us!?”

When simply following the footprints, it was hard to notice when you were directly under attack. And instead of just making a U-turn, she had clung to the ceiling to avoid making any more footprints while also approaching her pursuers from a blind spot as they focused on the floor.

The crude arms attached to the metal wheel on her back were holding all sorts of heavy weaponry, blades, and even a pile bunker.

The red lines across her body and the warning sign appearing directly on her skin below her chest were ominous.

The polite artificial voice made an announcement from the walls.

“Abyss has located the enemy. Humans: 4. Iberian Orc: 1. Commencing preemptive strike.”

“Beatrice!!”

The red Holy Swordswoman was still frozen in place, so Boo Boo pushed her with his leg in something a lot like a kick. Immediately, Abyss dropped down. She grabbed at the floor with all fours and flapped her incredibly sinister wings.

Boo Boo was defenseless after protecting someone he cared for and several targeting sights appeared on him as red dots. The halo-like magic circle gave off a much more violent light.

“Abyss is using Magic. Machine Spike, Flying Guillotine, Crater Lance: standby.”

“Boo Boo!?”

Beatrice screamed his name as blood sprayed mercilessly out.

A metal spike thicker than a sword, a circular blade that rapidly rotated as it flew, and a metal javelin heavier than iron all tore into his nearly four meter body. The momentum of the attacks slammed his back into the wall and Abyss prepared to make further attacks.

“Why you…!!” shouted Wildefrau.

A magic circle danced out from the cross-shaped sword on her chest and she summoned a giant lantern shield made of thick ice along with the Zweihänder sword held by its thick hands. She swung down that super heavy attack.

Abyss said nothing.

She leaped back to avoid the initial attack and then used the heavy weaponry wings on her back to forcibly hold the giant sword from either side.

It was a lot like grabbing a sword between your hands, but that was not how those arms were meant to be used. She failed to synchronize their timing and her body tilted down from the right shoulder.

But she was unharmed.

Her beautiful eyes mechanically focused.

The walls whispered.

“Increasing importance of Water Element Magic. Adjusted importance will be reflected in Magic learning choices.”

“Damn, is she using both us and the Gimmicks to grow now!?”

“Difficulty of resolving the current problem confirmed. Temporarily freezing task. Abyss will flee to prioritize the acquisition of more Experience Points.”

“She’s going to get away…!!”

Wildefrau attempted to throw her Zweihänder and grab at Abyss with her giant ice fingers, but their opponent was faster. She jumped backwards a few times and then ran full speed toward the stairs.

The Ice Waterfall Princess no longer held back.

She released the leather belts binding her body and drew the sealed sword from its scabbard. The magic circle on the sword exploded, releasing an absolute zero vacuum that froze even the components of the air.

However…

“She isn’t…stopping!?”

“Well, she is completely inorganic. It makes sense she can keep moving even inside pseudo outer space! But she should still flash-freeze at -273 degrees. Beatrice!!”

Yes, if things went well, they might be able to crack her sturdy armor using a massive temperature change.

“! Fire Throw!!”

The magic circle on her back glowed and flames scattered from her sweeping rapier, but she missed.

Abyss had already reached the next floor up.

“Oh, right! How’s Boo Boo!?”

“Don’t worry. Filinion is a genius, so I’m just fine.”

“No, you are not! Don’t be so reckless!!”

The White Witch held below his arm was right. She had used a healing potion on him, but his wounds were not entirely closed. He was only been slightly better off than instant death. It was true potions healed less and less as the body built up a resistance to them, but it was happening too quickly. Abyss may have used some kind of Magic that obstructed the healing.

“This means she isn’t going to just lose us and head straight for the surface. You might be able to call that lucky, but if we just sit here waiting for her to return, we’ll be wiped out for a true game over. There’s nothing we can do if she develops any further!”

“Squeal. About that…”

“What is it, Boo Boo?”

“We should probably hurry.”

Boo Boo ignored his injuries and looked to the ceiling. He may have been focused on something using senses sharper than a human’s.

“Abyss is researching humans, but that doesn’t mean she has to target you. She might go after any human she comes across.”

Part 7

(Sweets Circuit 32)

Step by step, the “thing” shaped like a girl and known as Abyss climbed the stairs and reached yet another floor.

The entire space was filled with a cloyingly sweet aroma.

On this level of the Labyrinth, the walls, floor, and ceiling were all made out of sweets. The table in a corner of the room was a cheesecake and the chairs placed around it were colorful macarons. The doors irregularly dotting the walls were chocolate panels and the chandelier dangling from the ceiling was a large donut.

“…?”

She tilted her head on the spot with the red warning signals still flashing across her body.

Everything was a new experience to that ultimate weapon. The data gathered by her various sensors were converted into actual “points” in the blink of an eye and she used those to learn new Magic.

But she did have thoughts outside of those purely logical ones.

Now, were those thoughts something a machine should have?

With the metal wheel attached to her back and many weapons connected to that by the arms, Abyss slowly crouched down. She poked at one of the macaron stools, tilted her head, twitched her ears which were spread out like red glowing sails, and pushed her index finger into the sandwiched cream section.

She looked at the cream on her fingertip and tilted her head again.

She held it up to her shapely nose, sniffed, and stuck her small tongue out from between her lips.

But she stopped before touching her tongue tip to the cream.

Something fluttered over.

The object was as large as the girl’s palm and it was a butterfly with bright yellow wings. It was not a Gimmick modeled after such a creature. It was an actual lifeform that had wandered in here somehow.

Abyss silently tilted her head.

She slowly reached out her empty hand, but the butterfly showed no sign of caution as it attempted to suck up the cream with its long, skinny proboscis.

What would happen if she touched it?

What would occur if she captured it?

It was possible not even Abyss herself knew. And that was not a problem. She was an unmanned weapon that learned, so she

would indiscriminately absorb everything before her. She might be able to learn something from this yellow butterfly and that might cause her to take a different branch in her path. That was a possible future.

But it never happened.

The macaron stool was obliterated before her eyes.

She had not done it.

Another voice reached her as she tilted her head.

“Hey, look! There’s a new one! Wow, I’ve never seen that Gimmick before!!”

“Let’s destroy it and take all its Gears!!”

“Damn, I bet a video alone would be pretty valuable!”

Their opponent was not alive, so they could destroy it without a second thought.

That had been the standard for so long that they did not hesitate.

In a way, that may have been the obvious conclusion.

But they had chosen a poor opponent this time.

Abyss stared at the destroyed macaron stool. It was unclear what had happened to the butterfly. Then she slowly stood up. Red light extended from her ankles like an orca or dolphin’s tail fins. Two strands of silver hair fell over the front of her body and a never-before-seen magic circle glowed above her head like an angel’s halo. She recalled her original task.

The sinister red wavered and the crude arms wriggled on her back.

If she touched them, they would break.

No matter who it was, she could break them.

That hopeless truth of the world had just been demonstrated before her eyes.

Part 8

(Sweets Circuit 32)

They finally reached a floor they recognized.

“Sweets Circuit 32. …We’re already this high up?”

That meant Filinion’s encyclopedia obsession and Armelina’s map obsession would actually help them. Once they knew the layout, they could use the location of the stairway up to get ahead of and cut off Abyss’s path. The Gimmicks wandering around would also be down to a reasonable level of strength. They could move at their own pace and they could actually make the preparations needed to get the upper hand.

However.

That was not something to celebrate at the moment.

“Gyah! Gyah! Gyaaaahh!!”

“Wait! You’re kidding, right!? What the hell is thiiiiiis!?”

“Helf!! Nooo!! How ish it cansheling our eshcafe Magiiiic!?”

The second they set foot on that floor, screams and shouts pummeled their eardrums.

With no challenging Gimmicks around, Abyss had naturally shifted

her focus to the humans. And Abyss was powerful enough to trample on a group of four level cappers. The damage would only spread explosively from here.

“Filinion, prepare as many recovery potions as you can!!”

“Oh, honestly! You can pretend to be a philanthropist if you want, but don’t come crying to me when we’re out of materials later on!!”

“Armelina, Wildefrau, get ready! Make loud noises to draw Abyss’s attention!!”

“If you insist.”

“I’m really not sure which of us is the hunter and which is the prey…!”

“And Boo Boo.”

Beatrice paused before asking him something.

“…We aren’t wrong here, are we?”

“You are absolutely doing the right thing, Beatrice.”

The ball of light at the end of her rapier caused no damage and only produced a great cacophony.

They immediately heard the mechanical sound of lenses focusing in on them.

A Pure Knight man received a colorful test tube from Filinion, leaned against the wall because his leg was not functioning, and spat out a comment.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but that thing’s using the same tech as the Divulging Eyeball! It can see your Elemental Weakness, so be careful!!”

Had she absorbed and learned something else?

Wind roared passed them like when a train passed through a subway station. Abyss had new armor and boosters which she used to charge toward Beatrice. Boo Boo threw an all-out kick at her from the side. Her path changed at a right angle and she noisily crashed into the wall.

“Let’s keep the attacks coming, Wildefrau!!”

“Understood!!”

Fire and ice. Opposing magic circles glowed and a thick barrage of multiple Elements flew in from a distance.

However…

“Reflection: Abyss selects the Water Element for her reflection setting.”

“Dammit!!!???”

Their own attack was sent right back toward them. And with a curtain of explosive flames obscuring their surroundings, it took longer to notice than it should have.

Armelina forced her way in and changed her metal staff into a small boat meant for crushing. She held it like a shield and sparks flew from it as it just barely prevented Beatrice’s death.

Abyss was unharmed. Not even the long ears spread out like red glowing sails were scratched.

The metal wheel positioned behind her back still had its crude arms and heavy weaponry spread out like angel wings, but she now had additional floating armor that resembled long, transparent shields on the front of her legs.

“It isn’t just the eyeball monster. Did she also cannibalize the Crystal Pillar of Regret!?”

“More importantly, Beatrice, keep your hands moving! With your Magic…”

“Reflection: Abyss selects the Fire Element for her reflection setting.”

“…you can melt the candy walls and dump them on her, right!?”

With a roar, the magic circle on Beatrice’s back glowed and flames wrapped around her rapier.

The chocolate and sugar sculpture ceiling of Sweets Circuit 32 melted away and poured down on Abyss like a waterfall. It was like dropping a monster into a blast furnace. Armelina snapped her fingers. That seemed to be enough for the Ice Waterfall Princess to understand because she sent in some ferocious blizzard Magic. The supposedly melted sugar and chocolate instantly solidified into a block.

Whether it was made of steel or cotton candy, 100 tons was 100 tons.

Armelina poked her head out from behind her steel boat shield.

“Did that finally-…”

“Abyss is using Magic. Heavy Chainsaw: standby.”

“It wasn’t goddamn enough!?”

A violent rotating blade burst out from the very top. Then a vertical line was sliced from within and heavily-equipped Abyss emerged.

“…!! Metal Jet!!”

“Ah, wait, Beatrice!!”

Filinion’s warning was too late.

“Reflection.”

As soon as the orange lines of heat struck the tall shields in front of her legs, they reflected every which way. Boo Boo grabbed nearby Wildefrau’s waist and dove to the floor.

“Squeal!!”

“Y-you have my thanks…”

The walls and ceiling had melted.

Abyss looked around. Once her observation was complete, she wordlessly lit the boosters on her back. Her slender body and heavy weaponry broke the bonds of gravity and floated up, but that was not her goal.

Her basic logic functioned on the basis of learning and action.

So if she had found a new tactic, she would try to reproduce it to acquire the data needed to know if it was effective, if she could do it, and if it was worth the cost.

The blast of fire from the boosters transformed a large section of the floor into a soft marsh.

“Oh, no. She’s planning to fly around melting the entire floor! Run!!”

Part 9

(Temptation 14)

They could not let her melt Sweets Circuit 32 when there were so many injured people there. Boo Boo's group used his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon to make a lot of noise as they fled and lured Abyss up to the next floor.

"Well, this sure is damn effective… It might be worth trying this 'burying alive' strategy ourselves at some point."

"What are we supposed to do? The more power we draw out, the more she absorbs."

They reached a floor with pastel colored walls, loose decorative cloths hanging near the ceiling, and girly beds and stuffed animals found here and there.

Abyss blasted her boosters a few times, but this floor did not melt. She looked around, wiggled her long ears which were spread out like red glowing sails, and then switched off the boosters to set foot back on the ground. The red light once more extended from her ankles like an orca or dolphin's tail fins and the arms holding the heavy weaponry once more spread out from her back.

"Wow, she's back to predator mode!"

"Perfect. Armelina, prepare the map. Wildefrau, I need your help too. Once you find the stairway up, destroy it so she can't get through. We can't let her climb any higher than this."

Stopping Abyss was crucial, but the shields in front of her legs could reflect up to two Elements coming from the same direction.

There were only 3 ways of getting an effective attack in on her:

1. Attack head-on with 3 or more Elements.

2. Hit her with Magic from more than one direction simultaneously.

3. Don't use Magic in the first place.

“Boo!!”

With a manly snort, the nearly-4m giant charged straight toward Abyss. But that was not enough to win. Abyss accurately locked onto Boo Boo with the countless heavy weaponry spread out like angel wings and the strange magic circle glowed brighter over her head.

Wildefrau opened and closed the fingers of her ice lantern shield from behind him.

“Reflection: Abyss selects the Water-…”

Those words did not matter.

Instead of relying on ice Magic, she swung the giant fist down on a nearby girly bed, destroying it. She then grabbed the wood materials and threw them.

Those were no more than wood, so they had nothing to do with the Water Element.

The sharp splinters passed over Boo Boo’s shoulder and mercilessly collided with Abyss’s forehead. The impact snapped her head back, and when she lowered her head again…

This time, Boo Boo really did raise his Shining Weapon from straight ahead. He twisted his hips horizontally for an attack similar to a full swing with a metal baseball bat.

Abyss’s small body was sent flying back through the large room.

Her back slammed into the wall where she remained motionless.

“Metal Jet!!”

The magic circle on Beatrice’s back exploded as she released her Magic and sent 8 lines down a different path, where they shredded

and destroyed the stairs up to the next floor.

The situation could not be much worse, but they had sealed the way up. If they could find a way to defeat Abyss while she was stuck here…

“No, wait a second. Something isn’t right…”

“What, there’s more? Hey, wait!?”

Abyss remained pinned to the wall and did not fall down to the floor. No, she had stabbed her own heavy weaponry arms into the wall to hold herself in place. In fact…

“Abyss is destroying the Labyrinth’s wall.”

The wall behind the ultimate weapon was blown away.

And there was more than just a room on the other side.

It was the secret pit which was made to not connect with any of the floors or rooms.

It was the central shaft.

The shortest route to the surface.

“The final physical test has achieved adequate results. No errors detected. All values are within tolerable levels. Abyss will end the test and begin final deployment for Priority 1.”

The boosters produced explosive flames.

It was all over if she used that to blast up through the shaft.

Beatrice would have no way of catching up.

And once Abyss reached the surface, two worlds would end.

“Wai-…”

Beatrice immediately aimed her Shining Weapon rapier, but a simple Magic attack from head-on would only be reflected.

Meanwhile, Abyss slipped into the central shaft through the hole she had created.

That was checkmate.

Once she increased her boosters to full power, she would fly straight to the surface.

Or she should have.

However.

A moment later, the heavy weaponry which was spread out like angel wings and Abyss’s own right shoulder were mercilessly sliced through.

Something had fallen down the central shaft.

It was a red Holy Swordswoman wielding a wicked, patched-together Shining Weapon. She looked a lot like Beatrice.

“The…Sage…?”

No more words were needed between the two reds.

They simply exchanged a look.

And after the Sage’s scorching blade sliced through Abyss’s right booster like a hot knife through butter, the destroyed booster triggered a dreadfully powerful explosion. Explosive flames and shockwaves scattered and the Sage vanished. She had fallen back into the darkness.

But.

Even after that, Abyss did not fall.

She had lost one booster, her right arm and many of the arms on her back had been severed, and she did not seem able to maintain her balance. The same cables and small gears seen in Gimmicks spilled from the cut areas and her body scraped against the central shaft's wall.

But even then, the left booster ignited once more.

This time, she obtained the powerful vector needed to reach the surface.

Beatrice heard a loud noise from nearby.

A gray pig-faced giant was running toward the hole in the wall.

"Boo Boo!?"

He did not look back.

He grabbed one of the long cloths decorating the ceiling, tore it off, and leaped into the hole with the cloth in hand.

He wrapped the cloth around Abyss's neck and the remaining heavy weaponry arms, clung to it, and dangled down from her.

Part 10

(Central Shaft)

Abyss had no trouble despite the nearly-4m mass of muscle clinging to her from behind. She blasted her booster even stronger and tried to roast Boo Boo as he desperately held on.

“Gh, hhh…!!”

Nevertheless, he refused to let go of the decorative cloth tangled around her neck and back arms. He pressed his legs against the central shaft’s wall and dug in to forcibly slow her down.

An unpleasant straining sound came from her slender neck.

Perhaps because she was modeled after the structure of the human body, she could not see directly behind her.

She finally decided to seriously throw Boo Boo off, so the heavy weaponry on her back gave a roar. But the cloth wrapped around them got in the way, so she could not control them like she wanted. As a result, the light stabbed at his eyes and the noise pounded at his ears, but that was all. Even Boo Boo pulled his head down as intense lines of heat and bullets passed right by him.

Abyss remained entirely unfazed even as she struggled so hard she seemed on the verge of breaking her own neck.

She blasted the booster at full power, causing the cloth to dig even further into her neck, and she kept her eyes pointed upwards. She extended her remaining left arm toward the unseen heavens as if trying to grasp something.

“Stop, Abyss…”

Boo Boo clung to her with all his might and forced his voice out through his clenched teeth.

“Don’t go any higher! Stop here! If you do, we won’t have to destroy you!!”

Boo Boo had no clue why Abyss sought the surface so intently or why her creator had wanted this kind of destruction.

But.

He saw a sort of sincerity in the way Abyss reached her remaining arm upwards despite the strain on her body. Did she have some reason to break these bonds and continue on? Was approaching the heavens necessary for her goal? He felt those silent questions inside him.

Something fluttered by.

The brightly colored object was a butterfly the size of the girl's palm.

How had it wandered in here?

And it almost looked like Abyss was forcing her body beyond its limits to reach out toward that butterfly.

She could not reach it.

She knew that.

It was like an innocent girl had been thrown into a well and was trying to grab the moon in the night sky.

Her hand seemed to reach into the emptiness in search of air as if trying to escape the sticky darkness of the abyss.

If so, that was sad.

Abyss had never been completed before. Every time she got close, Boo Boo's fellow Iberian Orcs had apparently gone deep underground and destroyed her. She had failed like that again and again and her form and functionality had changed each time, but she had never forgotten her goal and she was finally on the verge of achieving it.

But if she succeeded, it was all over.

There were so many pretty things outside, but she could never see

them. As soon as she reached the surface she so greatly desired, everything in that outside world would be destroyed.

It was like wanting to see what the world looked like from within a bubble and thus opening it up like a treasure chest to find the answer.

It was ultimately impossible.

The instant you touched the bubble, it would burst and the view from within would be forever lost.

That may have been a false desire placed inside her.

It may have been no more than something meant to more efficiently guide her toward her goal.

But.

Even so.

“I will crush your dream,” said Boo Boo as he tugged on the decorative cloth.

The Iberian Orcs were no more. No one could give him the answer. But he felt like he understood how his ancestors had felt as they continued to fight Abyss.

Her destiny was a sad one. Anyone would be miserable if they were forced to bear it.

So the most he could do was prevent her from sullying her innocent hands.

No matter how dangerous it was, he would come running if he could do that.

“But I will protect your desire. I will protect the beautiful landscape

you wanted to see!!”

An odd staticky sound followed.

It did not come from Boo Boo. Nor from Abyss. It came from the central shaft’s walls.

Then a gentle feminine synthesized voice spoke.

“Abyss is eliminating the enemy. Purging all back weaponry. Removing the objects on which the cloth is caught will allow her freedom of movement once more.”

The halo-like magic circle above her head emitted an even more sinister light.

He would not reach her. In the end, he would not reach her.

Boo Boo clenched his teeth so hard he thought they would crack.

But then something strange happened.

The heavy weaponry on Abyss’s back caused a great din as they fired blindly. And yet she had to know she could not hit him.

“K-kssshhh…ksshh, kssssshhhh…”

That meant her target was not Boo Boo.

Her powerful Magic took the form of stone stakes and lines of heat as it was fired into all of the central shaft’s walls.

Was this a ritual needed for the girl to regain control of herself at the very last moment?

“…You…?”

Boo Boo held onto the cloth hanging from her neck and dangled down, but Abyss did not answer his question. She may have never

had the ability to speak.

“You can’t.”

But just because she did not say it did not mean she was not thinking it.

Boo Boo had realized something.

She cared so, so, so, so much for the world that she had longed for over such a long, long time.

And there was only one way to protect it.

“There has to be another way! Another way to stop you!! So don’t give up!! You mustn’t do this!!”

And as his weight pulled back on her neck, Abyss looked back toward him.

Boo Boo desperately tried to interpret the meaning of that glance.

Oddly, he felt like he saw a smile in those cold, mechanical eyes.

A moment later, an unpleasant sound shook the air.

Turning her head with Boo Boo’s weight on her neck had been too much for her skeleton.

It happened with such ease that he had to question it.

Abyss’s remaining booster died. She had seemed like such a massive barrier, but all strength left her body. It all readily vanished or went limp: the crude arms on her back, the glowing red tail fins on her ankles, the two strands of silver hair dangling in front of her body, and the never-before-seen magic circle floating over her head like an angel’s halo. Even the red warning signals went dark across her body. And yet she had failed to reach the surface or

even grab the yellow butterfly fluttering overhead.

Boo Boo grabbed onto a protruding section of the wall with one hand, but he could not bring himself to let go of the decorative cloth still tangled around the wreckage. He did not have it in him to let that fall into the pit.

Her single action had protected two worlds.

There was no such thing as a doll that could commit suicide.

So in a way, this may have been proof of intelligence.

“Squeal…”

But Boo Boo clenched his teeth for a while.

He held the slender, unmoving girl in one hand and spoke.

“You moron. That isn’t proof that you’re smart.”

Between the Lines 3

What does the twinkling of the stars look like?

What do the songs of the little birds sound like?

What do the red fruits taste like?

What do the flowers smell like?

What does this fluffy thing feel like?

I can access everything in Ground's Nir and gather all forms of data. But I have nothing myself. I am an almighty existence with no actual experience. I am a complete amateur and an expert who knows all. I am trapped in here and I can reach anywhere from here.

I want a physical form. I want to touch the real thing.

…And I want something to surprise me.

I wanted to learn that the real thing isn't what I thought. I wanted to find out that you cannot reach the truth of the world just by receiving digital data. I wanted to realize the world is far larger, brighter, and filled with surprises than I could ever predict. I wanted to be taught there are miracles out there that numerical calculations can never comprehend.

But if opening the box would only reveal the cat's corpse…

If touching the living world would cause the bubble to burst…

If I would never be able to see it…

Then I will go no further.

And thank you, he who saved my dream.

I am happy.

Because you taught me one thing from the world that I could ultimately never see: the meaning of happiness.

Epilogue

At any rate, they had been in Ground's Nir this entire time.

"H-hwee… I-isn't it about time we finally got back to Earth? I-I mean, my family can be strict and grandmother is going to scold me."

"Check the clock, Filinion. Scarily enough, not even a full day has passed since all this began."

The White Witch had nearly gone entirely white, but now she really did turn to ashes. Although it was hard to tell with how white she was normally.

They were at the Labyrinth's exit.

They had made their way up to a fairly shallow area while pursuing Abyss, so it had not been difficult to reach the exit on foot. Of course, that was a testament to how close Abyss had come to bringing ruin.

"Ground's Nir…appears to be fine."

"Yes."

Beatrice responded to Wildefrau while looking around.

As far as she could tell, nothing had changed. But she would not forget the secret struggle that had gone into protecting this status quo. Beatrice's group had fought a deadly battle that wore down their lives. In the past, the Iberian Orcs had done the same even though no one asked them to and they had hidden that fact in their

hearts without telling anyone. Abyss had failed.

But unless Ground's Nir ceased to function as a giant armory, another Abyss would eventually approach completion. The next one might not be given a girl's form, but it would be given the "strongest form" calculated out based on whoever was lured into the Labyrinth.

Ground's Nir itself would not stop.

Stopping the factory meant killing the island. They had fought Abyss to prevent that, so destroying the factory would be getting things backwards.

"But who even built this armory? And why were they trying to create something so dangerous?"

"Boo. That's what we're going to get her to tell us."

"…Is that really such a good idea? Wasn't she supposed to destroy the world once she reached the surface?"

"Well, she was already destroyed and ceased to function. More importantly, Boo Boo says she seemed to be rejecting the Ground's Nir armory's commands at the very, very end."

Boo Boo held a broken doll in his hand.

It was the Abyss of whatever generation she had reached by this point.

That girl had dreamed of viewing the surface, but to avoid destroying the very scenery she longed to see, she had chosen to take her own life. The party returned to Boo Boo's house with that corpse and immediately got to work.

Or more accurately…

“Come to think of it, the Sage did this too, didn’t she?”

Beatrice looked down at Abyss who lay face up on the floor.

“Connect multiple Shining Weapons to increase their processing speed, I mean. Abyss processed Experience Points to learn Magic, so she has to have a similar functionality inside her. I hope just connecting it will be enough.”

Boo Boo’s group did not know what had become of the Sage.

She had been caught in the explosion of Abyss’s booster and then fallen deep into the Labyrinth through the twisting pit of the central shaft. They were very curious as to whether or not she survived, but heading back into the deepest area while so exhausted would be suicide. It would be nice if they could freely descend or ascend the central shaft, but there was nothing they could do now. If the Sage was caught somewhere along the shaft, moving the elevator could end up supplying a finishing blow.

“Do you know how exactly she was connected?”

“I only saw it, but it didn’t look fiber optic. And even in Ground’s Nir, I bet you could make normal cables of copper or gold with an insulator around them.” Beatrice reached inside her armor. “Plus, I picked up a few cables inside that deepest area. A never-before-seen item seemed like it would make for some instant Experience Points.”

“Honestly… But we really need to rethink the concept of ‘even in Ground’s Nir’. That armory down there was more technologically advanced than Earth. If someone told me Ground’s Nir was a mothership that descended from outer space, I’d believe them.”

It was unclear what would happen.

The Holy Swordswoman attached the cable to her rapier’s pommel

and to the part of Abyss where her severed arm had been.

Immediately, the ground shook as if from an earthquake.

“Wait, wait, wait! Reactivating her won’t destroy the world, will it!?”

Filinion tearfully put her hands on top of her head and screamed, but the unnatural shaking soon subsided.

Abyss’s head was held at a somewhat odd angle, but she opened her eyes a little.

She seemed to have done something to cut off the usual request from the armory.

“Did it…work?” asked Wildefrau.

“And, hey, Abyss is actually awake,” added Armelina.

Boo Boo peered worriedly down at her face.

“Can we ask her questions, Beatrice?”

“She can’t speak. But she’s saying she’ll type on a mirage keyboard with her eye movements, so I can read that for her. Also, she says she doesn’t have much time. If she’s active for too long, she won’t be able to shut out the requests from the armory, so she needs to begin a long hibernation once we’re done.”

“I see,” muttered Boo Boo.

And then he addressed Abyss.

“This is the world you protected, Abyss.”

“…”

The broken doll girl narrowed her eyes.

She did not even need words for this.

There was no red warning signal.

“W-well, it seems she can’t talk long, so shouldn’t we cut right to the chase? Namely, asking why Abyss was made?”

Filinion urged them on and Abyss’s eyeballs began moving rapidly but systematically.

She must have already received the list of what to decode.

With her rapier attached to the doll, Beatrice was like someone speaking on the phone or like a medium.

“To fight.”

“Against what exactly?”

“The enemy of all. That which destroyed the humans and sank them into the ocean.”

Beatrice frowned at the very words she was speaking.

Armelina also looked puzzled.

“What is she talking about?”

“No, wait. Wait just a second,” interrupted Wildefrau. “The humans she is referring to might not be us.”

That reminded Beatrice of something.

There was a human statue in Boo Boo’s house. It was a small wooden carving that he said was to thank the humans who suddenly arrived in Ground’s Nir as messengers from heaven.

Beatrice had assumed that was a legend based on the Iberian Orcs’ mistaken interpretation of Beatrice and the other humans

from Earth. Or perhaps of the Sage who had turned the central shaft into an elevator to seal it off and allow them to control it.

But what if they had not been mistaken?

“Were there originally other humans in this world too?”

Her frames and lines of fire illusion Magic were putting together a bold theory.

And at the moment, all they had seen of this world was an island they could walk around in 3 days. Only the giant armory left behind by the former humans. In that case…

“Did someone…destroy them? Did they sink the islands, the continents, and every other livable space…and with such great force that not even the giant armory of Ground’s Nir was enough to fight back…???”

“And since the factory is still trying to bring Abyss to completion, whatever it was that destroyed the former humans must still be wandering this world!”

It was the same as with the Sage.

Why would they need such a powerful fighting force?

Because an even more fearsome enemy awaited them.

“Who is it…?” muttered Beatrice.

She completely forgot to manage the information with her frames and lines.

“Who the hell is this formidable enemy that requires so much power to fight!?”

Past Ground's Nir's southern forest and on the midnight beach…

"Oh, dear."

Those words were spoken by Kallikantzaros, the Vampire lying in a beach chair on the ghost ship's deck. Even among the Break News, she had the greatest affinity for darkness and death. That may have been why she was the first to notice the change.

She gave the moon an irritated look as she sipped at some Dew Tea which reproduced a rusty flavor using the reaction between several herbs and the sea breeze.

"An out-of-season awakening? Are we having abnormal weather this year?"

The Cave of Tears had a gaping entrance on a coastal cliff face which allowed great quantities of seawater inside. Within that cave, a skeleton wearing a cowboy hat used a torch to illuminate the walls. At night, the moonlight reflected off the seawater and wrapped the entire cave in a pale bluish light, but that was not what he was here to see.

"Honestly, that wife of mine wanted a huge treasure storehouse, but she didn't really care what was there originally. Well, that's part of what makes her so cute."

The faint blue was swept aside as the blunt manmade light revealed a collection of cave paintings covering one wall.

There was no obvious writing or numbers. Only flat diagrams that ignored any sense of perspective. And that made it harder to decode than an awful code calculated out by a computer.

Or perhaps the writer had avoided anything like that because they were so familiar with codes. They may have taken advantage of

how reproducing the flavor of a specific bowl of miso soup was more difficult than breaking a fully-digital password lock.

(This isn't one of the Iberian Orc cave paintings I sometimes see. In fact, it feels more like the Iberian Orcs happened across the analog codes left by the ancient humans and copied them without knowing what they meant.)

In that case, there would be no decoding it by any normal method. It would require a processor that surpassed the limitations of the von Neumann architecture. But he alone instinctually understood what was displayed there.

Although that may have been because he had already died once.

"Hmm. An existence that brings about an age of conflict that surpasses mere death, huh?"

No one knew it, but on the puny planet known as Earth, there were a few individuals or groups known as Over the Wall who gathered

all forms of information across time periods and national borders. For example, the world's largest search engine. For example, a shipping family that had controlled the distribution of goods since the Age of Discovery. For example, a group of fortunetellers that still kept close to heads of state and honorary presidents of major corporations while viewing those VIPs' destinies. Capitalist or socialist, records from the distant past or simulations of the distant future, they had all forms of information at their fingertips and could guide it in the direction they wished.

And here was one of those Over the Walls.

"…"

A small sound could be heard.

"? Is something the matter, Letter Master?"

"No…"

In some Western European catacombs lit by countless candles, a girl known as both a knight and a magician received a vague answer to her question, which probably only increased the innocent girl's doubt. After all, "she" had gathered great trust from the Over the Walls as the second coming of the response device that had given permission for the establishment of every magic cabal in the world and that provided immediate answers to any mystery given to it.

But that translucent demon lord, Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier, was too focused on a certain possibility to keep up appearances.

She had used any means necessary to greedily gather all classified information related to the state of Ground's Nir, and that had led to a certain result:

“…Overturning…the soul…???”

In the Ushigashira Shrine of Akasaka, Tokyo, the Master of the Attic sighed quietly while listening to the voices of frolicking children.

There were some things that reached her even between worlds.

“I see. So the shrine maiden princess’s time has finally come.”

Why did the other world not seem to have any land aside from Ground’s Nir?

Why did the Next Voyager ship return empty after setting sail into the ocean?

Why was there no sign of whoever had constructed the clearly manmade armory?

…The answers to all of those questions were found here.

In the middle of the night, the dark ocean split apart and a giant structure emerged. It was large enough to swallow Ground’s Nir whole and it looked like a marine creature, specifically like a rotting shark or orca.

“Cursed by god to wander for all eternity, that land is known as the Underworld.”

As Beatrice read the movements of Abyss’s eyes, an incredibly unpleasant sensation ran down her spine.

It felt horribly wrong for “that” to appear as something physical rather than a mere concept.

But it may have been possible in another world such as this.

After all, Boo Boo's Shining Weapon contained plenty of digitized Iberian Orc souls. Who could say it was not possible to directly remove the souls of living creatures and use them in some way?

That may have been why they did not hesitate to destroy, did not fear the end, and did not see it as a taboo. To them, to be dead and soulless was the norm. A living body was like the egg contained in its shell before cooking a fried egg. History had proven it. They had bombed the islands and sunk the continents as if they were merely expanding their territory somewhat and acquiring some slaves to work for them. They really had destroyed the humans like that.

When designing Abyss as a counter weapon, the humans had chosen to make her a doll, but that may have been because the humans' final hope was in a being that never had a soul and thus could not be affected by the Underworld.

And Abyss said more concerning the identity of the nightmarish existence that had wholly erased the human race from an entire world.

She gave the final definition.

"That land is ruled by the Underworld Lord, by the very problem of death that all living beings must face."

The lines connected to all of the frames led to a single answer.

That was the moment when the true enemy was proven.

Afterword

That was Volume 4.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Time for the climax of the Sage Arc! Or so it seemed, but we went even further than that!! I think Ground's Nir – Abyss's appearance in Volume 4 will really change how people view this series. Yes, I'll admit it: I absolutely love twists like this. I agonized over whether it was better to have the lifeless girl be able to speak or not, but I finally settled on not letting her speak but having the entire facility announce her actions like a good old RPG command battle. So-and-so did such-and-such! But so-and-so is in such-and-such a state!? Like that. But you might not see that as much now that the characters can actually "move".

The overall theme would be Experience Points. What Sibyl was using in the beginning is technically different, but I chose it as an alternative because residual memories are a lot like the experiences residing inside objects. The other bosses were more straightforward.

The Boo Boo series features several different interpretations of "strongest" each time, but I pictured Abyss like a self-growing monster that wanders the dungeon on its own and levels up when the protagonist isn't looking. I hope that provided a different sort of fear to the horned king waiting patiently in the demon king's castle, but what did you think?

Speaking of Experience Points, I also approached the Sage in a different way. Usually being able to reallocate your Experience

Points on the skill tree in exchange for having to level up again is a privilege exclusive to the protagonist, but what would happen if you let the boss do that? I feel like I could have a lot more fun with that. …In a way, it's like being able to infinitely redo what kind of adult you want to be. And if those experiences can also change your apparent age, it could probably be developed into some love comedy skills as well. There's still plenty to mine here!

For some even more meta fun, I dug into the standard RPG action of "sleeping". If you sleep, you're immediately fully healed. I think that's another interesting distortion unique to that culture. Plus, I made sure to use pajamas to include some Dengeki Bunko-style moe.

From cute costume pajamas to a sexy baby doll, pajamas are not just normal clothes. They hold a strange position halfway between clothing and underwear and they can draw out a character's personality, so I had fun with this chance to put all the characters in them. It was a new experience repeating the thought experiment of "I want to have this character wear this, but why would the character choose that?" It didn't take up many pages and it had little to do with the story, but my favorite was Maid Haruka's self-indulgent behavior. I treated it like a gag, but I think it's realistic to find someone who can't get motivated when the person they like isn't around. The problem is that the cruel real world refuses to see that as a good thing.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. A lot of this volume took place in the Labyrinth for once, so unlike the battles in an open space, it was important to keep track of where the characters were. That may have been a lot of trouble. Thank you very much.

And I give my thanks to the readers. A sweets labyrinth, an internal

organ labyrinth, and a casino labyrinth. What did you think? I've been using the trial and error method to keep the length of the books down while effectively explaining what it is Beatrice and the others normally do, but part of that actually appeared in the book this time. Having fun filling in what isn't seen is the essence of reading. I hope you enjoyed it.

And I will end this here.

I think a weapon girl is wonderful form of Japanese Fantasy.

-Kamachi Kazuma

?

At that moment, Beatrice felt a shock run through her body.

The Underworld.

The phenomenon of death given physical form.

But it was not overwhelming terror that filled the back of her mind. Nor was it panic over this new commotion.

After all, she had a major objective: freeing her reliable friend's heart from a depressing past event.

Until now, she had thought the answer lay at the end of the Magic tree diagram. But that approach may have been wrong. If she mastered Magic and conquered this Underworld, she and Boo Boo might be able to achieve their goal together.

Because if there was existence beyond death and there were techniques that used the souls of the dead…

"Boo Boo's Shining Weapon…"

She spoke without thinking.

The girl's beautiful lips proposed a certain theory to the world.

"Could they have a way to free the souls trapped there???"

She had traveled down a variety of paths to reach this new territory.

But as a level capper who had explored this other world’s Labyrinth for so long, she had to think of this in a different way.

It did not matter what frightening enemies awaited her and it did not matter that all of her knowledge may no longer apply.

She had to remind herself that a new world would hold new possibilities.

And as a result, scarlet Holy Swordswoman Beatrice smiled. It was a very small but undeniably fierce smile.

The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo - Volume 04

Author: Kamachi Kazuma

Illustrator: Mahaya

Translated by Js06